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MY HEART'S IN THE HIGHLANDS

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"THE SUN MAID"

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MY HEART'S IN THE HIGHLANDS.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"ARTISTE," "BRIGHT MORNING," "VICTOR LESCAR,"
"THE SUN MAID."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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MY HEART'S IN THE HIGHLANDS.

CHAPTER I.

WHO ARE THEY?

A RED-HOT August sunset, a lurid sky, parched and glaring pavements, brown-scorched and thirsty parks, dust-laden trees, and dustier faces, proclaimed the season over and London going out of town.

The season had died hard that year. Some "foreign visitors of distinction" had arrived late in the day and kept the ball spinning quite a fortnight after its usual

time. Some tiresome piece of public business had sprung up, and Parliament was still sitting to-night, very warm and sleepy, down at Westminster.

Many houses were open along the Western squares. On the balconies, under striped awnings and festoons of fading flowers, pretty domestic groups might be seen—ladies, in cool evening toilettes, sipping their coffee, and gently waving their fans in the sultry air; men lounging among the bright dresses, musing sweetly of grouse and salmon, quite too tired and *blasé*, every one of them, to pretend even that the situation was romantic, or to find anything fitting to say about the pale evening star that struggled through the murky sky.

Every orthodox child in London had gone to sleep that night dreaming of sand spades and cockle pails, and bare-foot wadings by the briny shore.

The Ethiopian serenaders had the streets to themselves.

"The last man" lounged disconsolate in Boodle's window, for, neither being an M.P. nor having a family to dine with, he had positively nothing to do. In fact, London was very sleepy, very dusty, very hot and tired, and the single spot in the whole metropolis where noise, business, and activity reigned paramount as usual was the Euston Square Railway Station, where the limited mail for Scotland was made up, ready, and timed to start in ten minutes. Here things were all alive; it was an exciting moment, and certainly an exciting scene. The huge train stretched along the platform, the engine far beyond the entrance, the last carriage away in the uttermost regions, somewhere unseen. The luggage had been piled up; the scramble

for tickets, the struggle for places,—all the primary difficulties of the expedition were over; everything was packed in and all were ready—bound for the glorious old North, for the breezy uplands, the purple grouse moor, for the rocky forests, for the gurgling trout stream, and the deep brown salmon pools.

The tenth of August is, on the Highland line, the great crowded night of the year.

There were all kinds of wonderful people in that train; carriage after carriage was marked as reserved for special travellers, and a round of visits paid cursorily to each would have revealed to the inquisitive many individuals well known and distinguished.

There were *coupés* closed up and carefully defended by the well-tipped guards, from whence solitary smokers, enshrined in cynical and aristocratic seclusion, looked out with contempt upon a crowded and a

vulgar world. There were huge family carriages, with rows of little curly heads stretching along the window line, with governesses and schoolroom girls packed into them, and Eton boys armed with fishing-rods, that were often offensive to their neighbours' legs. There were secondary compartments attached to each of these, and crammed with German maids, Norman *bonnes*, London footmen, and all that upper level of the necessary retinue of an English family of quality when they rusticate in the Scottish Highlands. There were at least six of these, each with its full complement of singing birds, toy terriers, tame squirrels, and perambulators, besides all other etceteras and appendages appertaining thereunto; and among them was one where no youthful heads indeed lined the windows, but where a party was as-

sembled whose liveliness, diversity, and other striking peculiarities had attracted much curious attention as the train had slowly filled.

It was a roomy, luxurious carriage; that was evident from the outside. It had one large central compartment, two divisions for servants at one end, and a small single division, carefully closed and curtained, at the other. "Reserved!" "Reserved!" "Reserved!" had been placarded upon every pane of glass all along the platform side of the carriage from the earliest moment that the travellers had begun to collect, and a stout official, with a rugged, Scotch-looking face and a cheerful smile of expectation, had mounted guard at the doors—waiting for the coming occupants ever since the train was made up. So, public attention being easily caught and

curiosity quickly piqued, people had lounged about the platform near this big carriage, watching for a glimpse of the notable personages—royal, foreign, political, diplomatic, or fashionable—who might be about to take their seats therein.

And, first, such observers had seen perfect mountains of luggage arrive, and had watched it all being heaved up to the roof of the carriage or stowed away in the adjoining van; while the inquisitive had studied eagerly the initials, labels, addresses, and general characters of that luggage, with a view to any discoveries that might be made by this means. But it was unsatisfactory. The luggage was in quantity quite enormous, but it was also provokingly confusing in the revelations upon the outside. It was of divers descriptions, though at first exclusively masculine

in characteristics and style. There were portmanteaus, gun-cases, and fishing-baskets, and some military boxes of much-battered tin. There were new and smart-looking inventions for carrying every conceivable article of the male toilet; and there were specimens of the old and time-worn traveller's valise, dust-begrimed, label-covered, quite disgracefully scratched and disfigured, that spoke of many journeys with their respective owners in other climes and countries, far and near. And all these were bedizened or scrawled over with at least six different monograms and strange devices, unintelligible to the public, and revealing nothing at all satisfactory as to their owners' degrees or names.

Twenty minutes had passed in the stowing away by three bustling porters of this perplexing conglomeration of travellers' property,

and this process had gone on under the careful superintending eyes of three or four private servants, whose varied appearance and different nationalities were as puzzling and contradictory as the luggage in their charge. There was a sallow-faced Greek among them, and a fat rustic-looking Englishman, a pompous Cockney of the "gentleman's gentleman" species, and a trim Parisian valet of the most accepted school. They all seemed capital friends, well acquainted, and well accustomed to work together.

The "curious" had become just a little tired of observing them, when a fresh arrival caused an instant renewal of excitement, and much haste and eagerness amongst the porters and officials who bustled round. There came another mountain of luggage spinning down the crowded platform, piled high upon a porter's barrow,

and accompanying this, were a quick-eyed little French maid, a tall slim footman in dark livery, and a smart young fellow in the Highland dress. This latter, in his green kilt and flowing plaid, came down the platform walking with a rapid, springy step; his head held high, his bonnet cocked jauntily on one side, as if quite aware of the attention he attracted and of the air of distinction he gave to his party. He touched his bonnet and bowed civilly to the group of valets; he shook hands with the stout old official with the rough Scotch face; and then he sprang into the central carriage.

There was much bustle and more fuss and hurry there, and much noisy chatter in a curiously mixed jargon of French-English and English-Scotch, and up from the loaded barrow was tossed on to the

carriage roof box after box, all trim and feminine, and many masculine portmanteaus as well. Then into the carriage were lifted by the porters, and received and arranged by the servant in the Highland dress, many articles of divers kinds—luncheon-baskets and a big wine-hamper; Canadian furs and Austrian rugs, expanding air-cushions and soft silky coverings of eider down; books from Mudie's, leather cigar boxes, travelling writing-desks, silver-clasped cases of liqueurs, and railway lamps of every conceivable device. All these he arranged dexterously with a well-accustomed speed over the seats of the large carriage—fixing up the lamps, opening the wine hampers, and laying books on one table and a box of playing cards and counters upon another.

All was ready in five minutes, and

the saloon looked sufficiently comfortable and well furnished with food and occupation for at least a month's journey to Siberia. Then he helped the maid in, passing her through to the small compartment at the further end; and, following her, the tall footman stepped up also for a moment, and they all busied themselves with the rapid arrangements of the smaller sleeping-room. Sundry little feminine attributes were conveyed in there. The soft eider downs, the Mudie novels, the tiny Russian-bound writing-case, and the huge leather jewel-box, to which the maid nervously clung. All these being quite ready, the little Frenchwoman sat down, sighed most disconsolately, undid her bonnet-strings, and of course ejaculated, "Ah! mon Dieu!"

"Ye'll do now," said the young Scotchman; "won't ye, eh? Bong-swore, mam-

selle. Sweet dreams to you. 'Ere's y'r cauld chicken and y'r shampane a' riddy for ye; and ye'll get a gude breakfast, I'll warrant ye, at Pairth, in the morrnin'."

He spoke with a curious lingo of his own invention and acquirement, for, upon the estimable foundation of a strong Scottish brogue, he had carefully embroidered the latest Cockney style of disposing of his "h's," combined with many French expressions learnt from his *piquante* Parisian companion, and from other foreign experiences and foreign friends.

"Bon soir, Monsieur Ewanne. Au revoir, mon ami. Ach! Mon Dieu!"

"The last bell! By Jove, they'll be late!" exclaimed some one. "No, here they come!"

Trooping rapidly down the platform (for they had all met at the entrance) came

at last the "party;" and there were six of them in all. An old man, four young or middle-aged, and a girl. She was young, at all events, and she walked by the elder man, clinging lightly to his arm. Down the station they all came together, laughing and talking loudly and merrily, hurrying eagerly forward, for they were very nearly late. The last bell was going even now.

"Got the ticket, Ewen?" exclaimed the old man to the young Highlander, who "stood attention," to receive them at the carriage door.

"Yes, sir; here it is;" and he held out a large official-looking paper, engaging the carriage for them the whole way through.

The old man sprang lightly in as he took the paper, and then he instantly turned to give his daughter a hand.

"Gently, my love! There, that is it!

Now then, *in* all of you! Not a minute to lose. This is capital! What a famous carriage! Well done, Ewen. Is everything stowed away?"

"Yes, sir; all right, sir."

"Capital! Come along, my boys! Jump in! That's it! Now, where will you sit? Clare! you here, my love? Yes, that is charming; and you, Percy, there you are; and Everett, there is your place. Hartopp, that fur is yours, is it not? And that is *your* corner, Keith; will you do by the window? Yes, all right! Here we all are! this is famous! Sit down, all of you! Now—we'll do. Lots of champagne, I hope, and I do trust that Leplat has packed us a creditable *petit souper* in that hamper there. All right, my boys! Heigho! now we're off—once more, 'Hurrah for the old North again!'"

And off they were. In another second, the porters, pocketing their last shillings, had stepped hastily back, the bell rang once more, puff went the heavy engine, and away glided the train, away from the noisy platform, out of the hot, stuffy station into the free, summer air.

It had been dusky already in the big station, but instantly as they passed out of it, floods of ruddy light came streaming from a level sunset, that was glowing upon the suburbs far away; and it streamed into the big central carriage, lighting up with a quick revelation for our inspection every face and figure there. It picked out and framed in especially the face, the eyes, and the amber brown hair of the girl, as she bent forward, and turned her gaze upon the sun—setting so red and fiery in the summer sky. It flashed into her eyes and they glistened

back upon it with a light almost as fearless and as keen. The clear-cut eyelids did not swerve or falter, nor did the long dark lashes droop. She gazed full and steadily; her small oval countenance, with its delicately chiselled features; her finely curved nostrils; her parted lips, and glisten of pearly teeth; her fair skin, with its warm, heathful wash of vivid colour upon the soft cheek; the noble curve of her white bending neck,—all were bathed in the lustre and glow of the gorgeous sunlight, and shone out, spite its powerful and searching scrutiny, faultless in the beauty and the freshness of sparkling, unclouded youth. Clare, or "Éclair," as her friends sometimes called her, was like her name.

There is very little to distinguish the Scotch girl from the English in the present day. "The chieftain's daughter" of our

time wears no silken snood, and her French *modiste* is more likely to sport the tartan plaid upon ample shoulders than she is. Clare's dress revealed nothing, save, that at "the Scotch House," Rue de la Paix, Paris, they hung their travelling skirts to perfection, and had a marvellously good cut for a Norfolk jacket, fitting it trim and firm about the shoulders and neck. Both skirt and jacket were of light grey tweed, and her *peau de Swede* gloves matched it exactly in shade and hue. A brown leather belt encircled her trim waist, and formed, with its numerous and indescribable appendages, an excellent advertisement for Mr. Thornhill; a round hat of the same tweed as her dress, and adorned with a casting-line and some gaily tinted trout-hooks, was set lightly on the coils of her brown hair, and was not unbecoming. She had sat down in the

centre place of one end of the large carriage. By her side the old gentleman had taken his seat, and whilst the start was being achieved and Clare's attention caught by the summer sunset, he had been talking incessantly loud and cheerily to every one else in the carriage, and settling himself with considerable care and deliberation in the meantime.

He was a handsome old man—tall and well preserved in figure, and looking, as some men do, evidently younger than his age. He had bright dark eyes—quick and restless, and full of changeful and perhaps uncertain expression. He wore a grey beard, cut short, a little pointed, and very carefully curled and trimmed. He was decidedly a very smart old man—his dress evincing as much care and consideration as his moustache. It was rough and simple indeed, but showed

touches of studied finish that betrayed time and forethought expended upon the questions of external suitability and taste. The make and fit of his Macdougal tweed, the style of his watch-chain and his massive rings, all expressed much character and individuality of their own, while the costly perfection of comfort in his whole surroundings and possessions betrayed a high state of culture of those æsthetic tastes for personal luxury which some people admire very much, and which they cursorily express (when they describe such a man) as *savoir vivre*—"he knows how to live!" He had a gay, pleasant smile, and his manners were cordial and charming, as he talked round the party and did the honours of the big saloon. As they started he removed instantly his low-crowned hat, and, opening a huge travelling-bag that lay near his feet, he drew forth

from it a Scotch bonnet, a Prince Charlie of rough blue frieze, decorated with a crest-brooch and a tuft of withered heather. This he stuck lightly and far aslant upon his grey head, and then settled himself snugly into his corner, as if his personal preparations for northern travel were now satisfactorily complete.

Three of the other men fidgetted among the rugs and sticks, the fishing rods and umbrellas, for some minutes longer, each ascertaining that his particular property had been safely deposited by his own servant in its right place.

A middle-aged man dropped finally into a seat at one side, after nervously scrutinizing all his rugs and cases of divers sizes and hue. He sat near the inner door, and it was he whom his old friend had called "Hartopp." He took a considerable time

to make himself comfortable and to ascertain that his possessions were secure.

Another, the young fellow who had been called Keith, tossed into the hanging nets a confusion of cloaks and fishing-rods that he had found casually deposited in his place, and then sat down with a sigh of relief. Stretching himself with a great yawn, he exclaimed—

"Thank goodness! at last that's over; and now, hurrah! we are off! By Jove! I did think I'd lost the train."

"You were uncommonly near it," exclaimed, in answer, a little slight man who stood close to him, and who was still busy packing away, with great care and deliberation, a quantity of curious-looking articles, under the seat and above his head. "I thought you had lost it; the last bell was ringing when your hansom came in sight."

"Was it, by Jove? Well, I had been down at the Raleigh. I had been having a bit of dinner with Tip Carter, and he had one of his stories on, that lasted from fish till cheese time; and though I stayed as long as I could for the climax, it had not come to an end when I bolted off. What a fellow he is! Look out, Everett! What's that you are stuffing in behind my heels?"

"Nothing in life, my dear boy. Never mind, keep quiet; it is only my easel-rests. There, now they are all right, are they not? Well, stop a minute, and I will push them further in."

And down went the small man on his knees, and his head disappeared immediately beneath the falling curtains of the seat. His movable possessions were evidently a very valuable and cherished property to

him. They seemed mostly artistic, and, although his etceteras of travel were not luxurious, in quantity they seemed large: black colour-cases, long easel-rests, vast portfolios that travelled loosely because too large for any portmanteaus to carry; a big cigar-case, that he drew carefully from his pocket, examined, and replaced again; a long rough cloak, somewhat like an ulster, but with a hood and fastening that declared it of Arab make; a striped Spanish rug, much faded and worn;—these seemed the familiar and accustomed articles with which he intended to envelope his small, brown-clad person through the journey of the night. He sat down presently, patted his chest, shrugged his shoulders, and looked tranquilly round. He, too, seemed to think that a good start once made was a matter of encouragement and congratulation.

"Halloa, Percy!" he cried suddenly, "Wake up!"

"I was *not* asleep."

The answer came slowly and most emphatically from the corner of the carriage furthest from Everett—from the place by Clare, on the opposite side to where her father sat. The speaker instantly lapsed into silence again.

"Looks very like it!" cried Keith. "And it is only half-past eight o'clock!"

A light, good-humoured laugh rang through the carriage, echoed from one to the others, and they all turned upon Percy. But he did not seem to care. He laughed back at them, settled his shoulders further down into his snug corner, glanced up for an instant at Clare, who was smiling now full and brightly into his face, and then he looked away, as she had done, out towards

the burnished, fiery summer sky, and let his gaze wander idly across the green fields and the flowering hedges that seemed rushing past.

Far beyond Hendon, now they were skimming rapidly on. It is a two hours' run to Rugby, and on this side that station they would not stop at all. And beyond this they would go on again, flying hour after hour through the starry night, stopping only to water the engine or to refresh at Carlisle. On, on, till the breaking of the summer's morning would find them crossing the border into Scotland, and a nine o'clock breakfast hour bring them to Perth. And all the while, the cosy party in the big carriage would remain quite undisturbed over their *petit souper;* over their midnight rubber of whist or their *écarté* and their hamper of iced champagne; for no vulgar

or offensive intruder ever ventured to transgress the luxurious seclusion in which they were pleased to travel.

And who were they? Some great and distinguished persons, flying to seek, in the retirement of the mountains, repose and refreshment after months of hard political service or the brilliant and fatiguing achievements of great public careers? Was the old man some mighty Highland potentate, such as the Duke of Macalastair Strathallendale, journeying in all this appropriate state and seclusion from his palace in Piccadilly, or his hall in Lincolnshire, to visit the castle of his father in the far North?

Nothing of the kind! It was only Old George Erskine, as well known a man, however, be it said, as his Grace of Strathallendale himself — Old George Erskine, travelling up with his daughter and four

chosen friends, to shoot grouse, to stalk deer, and to fish salmon with his brother, the old Laird at 'The Glen.'

There are more ways than one of being distinguished in the world, and Old George's style was an actual distinction, in fact a widespread notoriety, for — the way he lived! "We have but one life, as far as *we* know, my dear fellow," was his favourite philosophy—"but one life; let's make the best of it!" He was not at all rich, being only a younger son; but that never affected him in any way. To money in all its respects he was sublimely and magnificently indifferent; he was as generous with an empty purse as any man ever was with a full one. He was so selfishly kind-hearted and so kind-heartedly selfish, that men forgave him everything. His epicurean self-love was wrapt up in such a cordial

manner, wreathed round with such sunny smiles, expressed in such dulcet and persuasive terms that people ceased to recognize it, and generally failed to catch the self-intended motive and aim which inevitably and in reality underlay every smile, every action, and every word. They were not deep motives either—no profound Machiavellian powers of intrigue or diplomacy characterized the lines of action with Old George; but simply selfishness, open, patent, confessed—only decorated with this knack of smiling so sweetly about it, of uttering it so softly, and of enveloping it in a cordial and warm style of address.

So he had smiled himself into enjoyment of most things that are pleasant in this life; so he had taken popularity by storm, since his very boyhood; was liked somehow by many strange varieties of men, and loved by

—we will not say by *how* many marvellous and most contradictory varieties of women, for George, from first to last in his own long summer day, had been loved a good deal indeed. Now he did not care very much about all that—though he could fool and flatter very prettily still, but he never wasted much of his remaining and most valuable time over this sort of thing, and was quite satisfied now with being adored by his daughter.

And she did adore him—his faults and his virtues, his curiously blended kindliness and selfishness, his follies and his charms. They were all one to her, they made up simply—him: father, companion, guardian, teacher, and guide, for the last six years of their wanderings over a sunlit world together.

"Sunlit," for Old George made a point of living in sunshine! And with him,

winter had meant for Clare through all these years, azure skies and limpid waters, where their white-winged yacht, *Le Plaisir*, had floated idly or lain at anchor by the coral shores in bright Italian bays—at Nice, at Civita Vecchia, or beneath the fiery shadows of Vesuvius at Naples. And only summer ever found them in England—when the little yacht was anchored at the Isle of Wight, and the tiny house in Curzon Street thrown open, and the 20th of May came round, and the drags turned out in the Park as usual, and the most faultless, unpretentious, and unexceptional among all was ever Old George Erskine's, as he tooled gently round, driving a team almost priceless in value as they were quiet in appearance, with a coach-load of friends behind him, and with his daughter always upon the box.

Of his friends, or his "pals," as indeed in

this day of grace we should rightly call them, the four now with him in this North-Western Railway carriage were his prime favourites—the companions boon and cheerful of yacht and race-course, of baccarat and whist-table, of forest and moor. They were all far behind him in one respect, for he liked invariably for companions men much younger than himself; even Sir Edward Hartopp, who was an M.P. and well on in life, was ten years younger, at the very least, than Old George!

George Erskine was turning seventy, and (save by the care and artistic kindness with which he tended and cultivated the general effect of his striking and very handsome appearance) he made no effort whatever to conceal his age. Indeed, combined, as it was, with quick activity and keen powers of youthful appreciation and

enjoyment of life, he was rather proud of it, and—"When you were in your cradle, my dear boy," was a favourite point with which he often emphasized remarks upon an ancient narrative or reminiscence to some white-haired companion, perhaps several years older than himself.

Sir Edward Hartopp was different. He was nearing sixty, but liked to be thought younger. He wore a wig, which was jet black and luxuriant; his teeth were snowy white, and false, every one of them, as the smile in which he often showed them. He was an old day friend of George Erskine, and the one friend in the whole of her father's coterie who never could get on with Clare. She was a mistake in his eyes, and her presence an annoyance. For she had not been always there, and before her time, only six years ago, some things had been very different with

them. Their laughter-loving party had numbered then, in yacht or opera-box, many members who were now no more, and as Clare failed to amuse him, Sir Edward Hartopp had preferred things as they were. This paternal freak of George Erskine in his old age was to him a decided bore. No help for it, however. These two lives of child and father were united with golden links of love and sympathy, forbearance and mutual understanding, that nothing in life or death would lightly sever now, and all the others liked it.

The young fellow Keith liked everything. He was a Guardsman by profession, and in bearskin and tunic round by the Palace Corner, you might see a man of his sort any summer's day. He was neither fair nor dark; he was tall, well dressed, and eminently well mannered. He lived "like

every other fellow," he would have told you —a year by year round of easy duty and hard pleasure; that is, of amusement that required much exertion, and work that required none to do. He growled at the work, and sighed and yawned over the smallest iota of military routine, or the faintest insinuation of a drill; but, again, he never spared himself an inch at polo, at the fences, on the hunting field, or in breasting the crags on the hill.

He loved Old George Erskine, who had attached him to his "lot" when he was a cornet, and had amiably helped him to spend his money and to gild his time. In George's smoking den he had his own place. In Clare's drawing-room he was indifferently welcome, especially if he brought a new valse or a song. In the yacht, in the hunting box, or on the drag top he was

equally at home, and a seat was kept for him in the big saloon, when they travelled up to Scotland, quite as a matter of course. He seemed suited to the position, and no one wondered to find him there.

But with Everett Hardy it was another thing. People who knew little of either of them often wondered what attraction George Erskine and Everett Hardy could find in each other; wondering to find the old man so attached to the younger, and always seeking his companionship by land or sea, and wondering still more to find Everett always responding. To see his slight figure and small delicate face constantly in his place beyond Clare's shoulders on the top of the crowded drag—to find him with his easel and colours as invariably among the August party packed into the family carriage; and people speculated why a man so diffi-

cult to catch at most times, a man so fastidious, so easily scared as little Everett Hardy, R.A., should find himself happy and at his ease in the heterogeneous society collected round Old George Erskine and his daughter Clare. The origin of the friendship dated far back into the early days of Clare's coming among them, and involved a long story of chance meetings, and of foreign wanderings, and of many sweet memories of that long ago; and its endurance with such strong mutual fidelity was just one of those characteristics of Old George by which he attached such odd men to him, and kept them tender-hearted and faithful towards him, spite of all his absurdities and peccadilloes through youth and age, from changeful year to year.

Everett Hardy could realize no existence now of which a large annual portion

did not imply to him George Erskine and Clare. He came amongst them, and went to and fro with them, bringing his easel and colour-boxes with him, and all his sweet poetic fancies, his strange ways, his fastidious notions, his quaintness, his refinement, and all the big artist soul that dwelt in his little slim body as well. Valuable contributions to more than one of the party they were—all these inner possessions which he carried with him—valuable and well appreciated. Everett Hardy was understood among them, and went and came unmolested in his own peculiar way.

So this was the entire party in the saloon carriage, except the big fellow who sat silent, and, as Everett asserted, asleep in the far-away corner by Clare's side. He was not asleep, however; the accusation was unfounded. His eyes were sufficiently open

to scan the objects as they passed them swiftly on their way; but only just sufficiently, for the lids hung low and heavily above them, and the eyelashes almost rested upon his cheek. He was a handsome young fellow, with a pleasing air about him, both of extreme simplicity and of good breeding. He wore a fair moustache, had close-cut light-coloured hair, blue eyes, and a fair complexion like a girl; but there was nothing else effeminate about him. His shoulders were broad and strong, and his height immense, whilst the ease of his movements and the quiet unconscious grace of his attitudes revealed plenty of latent energy and force. He was the Hon. Percy Bligh, the younger and very penniless brother of Lord Wynton, a peer well known on the racecourse and in the betting-ring, although very little to the Upper

House, or to any other place of propriety or distinction. "Percy is an awfully good fellow," was the universal verdict; "worth ten of Wynton any day." And Percy was a good fellow, of that particular form of goodness which goes quietly through the world, doing little and saying less. Up to a certain year of his life he had, moreover, *felt* nothing, or at least nothing worth mentioning, as he would have told you; and if he had thought anything, well, he had kept it most carefully to himself. And yet men liked him thoroughly, and women quite as much as (by the generality) he had hitherto cared to be liked—and up to six years ago, his life had been all in generalities. Since then, it had found a specialty indeed—but one that seemed still too deep for words—at least, it had not yet inspired him with language. He was silent upon this as upon other things!

And now they have been all described to you externally, and with some internal revelations as well—except, indeed, Clare, and of her I have only spoken with respect to a Norfolk jacket and a Thornhill belt, and limpid eyes and amber hair. But I will not pause now to penetrate or to analyse further, save only just to say—what strikes me afresh as I look back upon her, gazing full upon the sunset—that I cannot think she will do for a modern heroine; not certainly if she must be dragged through all the woe and love agonies, all the fiery, furious heart-anguish of a modern novel! For I cannot conceive that proud young head bending under the passion-storm, as some youthful suffering heroines are in these days made to cringe and droop and bend. I cannot imagine these full bright eyes with their glory dimmed for any one, while truth and

honour and God's sunshine upon the Highland hills were left for her on earth. I cannot picture her in paroxysms of passionate anguish, such as we have often described to us for "modern love," and I feel sure that according to accepted method in these things she will neither act nor feel. I do not think that her freedom of spirit nor the self-contained strength of her young heart will ever yield or desert her, and I am somewhat afraid, therefore, lest she should fail me as a modern heroine after all. And yet, Éclair, dear, bright Éclair, I will tell your story, and let you win a hearing, if it may be, for yourself; let your strong young heart unfold and declare itself just in your own sweet way, not mine; let you *love*, too, in your own way—for surely these eyes could shimmer and glisten tenderly, these soft red lips part and

tremble, and that ringing voice tune itself to *love!* Surely—for now, even now, as she is silent, see, a soft mystic light quivers and scintillates in these crystal depths, an absent expression creeps over her countenance, and a smile plays and lingers upon her lips. For long after they started she remained thus silent, regardless of the summer storm of fiery repartee that waged between Keith and her father, and Hartopp and Everett, as the ball of frothy talk was lightly tossed between them to and fro.

"You left the House sitting when you came away, Hartopp?" said old Erskine more gravely at last, as they all settled down.

"Oh, yes; I paired with Featherstone, and made off. I have done with that treadmill for one session at least."

"You shining Tory light of her Majesty's

Government, how will they get on without you?" responded Colonel Erskine. He was a colonel of something—I am sure I forget what, probably an honorary colonel, so called by courtesy, having been in the Carbineers, and having accompanied them in a campaign of foreign service, some fifty years ago. "I expect, Hartopp," he continued, "that we shall find a telegram at Perth to-morrow morning, summoning you back again to the last great division, and containing the Premier's offer of a seat in the Cabinet—a slight acknowledgment of distinguished services past and to come!"

"My deah fellah," exclaimed Sir Edward, showing his white teeth, "many thanks to you. No; a seat in the House in these days is a *sine quâ non* for a man at my time of life, who is unlucky enough to have

a family constituency on his shoulders and at his back; but a little of it goes a long way for me. I am too old a Bohemian, too fond of *la belle vie dorée*, my dear Erskine, to waste my few remaining years buried in the Blue-books and Parliamentary reports. Oh, no! if they will sit after the tenth of August, they must sit without me."

"I suppose they will rise to-morrow or next day?" said Everett.

"Ya-as, ya-as," replied Sir Edward, in slightly patronizing tones, turning quickly in his seat towards his questioner, and assuming to himself for the moment something of the air and prestige to which his presumed political position and information entitled him. "Oh, ya-as, they will finish to-morrow; this division on the malt question to-night, in the last point, they mean to tackle. You see, they must get up North

before the Twelfth, on Saturday. By gad! to-morrow evening's train will be full of them, and I think the Prince of Wales leaves even to-night."

"That he does," said Keith. "I saw his train standing on t'other side the platform as I came in. He starts at ten, they told me, and it is to be hoped we shall go steadily, for I suspect he will chase us all the way."

"Right up to Perth?" inquired Hardy.

"Right up to Perth," answered Colonel Erskine. "He will get in for breakfast ten minutes after we do to-morrow morning."

"Saw him come out of the Marlborough as I came along," rejoined Keith, "and he was down at Hurlingham with the Princess in the afternoon. All the diminished world left in town was there, indeed; it was an extra match got up impromptu by our

fellows, you know; and, by jingo! we had a scrimmage! Toddy Miles was tipped off his pony and pitched straight on to his head. Gerard Foley cannoned against him, and for half a minute we thought he was regularly done. He was quite blue, I tell you, when we picked him up, and then turned as white as a ghost a second after. By Jove! there *was* a row in the tent and all along the lines among the people, and fellows came running like mad to have a look at poor Toddy, and to see if he were really dead. And H.R.H. was there in no time, as fast as any of them. He is very fond of Toddy Miles, you know, and was awfully cut up and sorry to see him lie and pant there and look all ghastly and blue——"

"Well," said Everett, "and the sequel?" for Keith began pulling hard at his cigar at this moment, and the line of his narrative was precipitately dropped.

"It is going out," he exclaimed. "Confound it! No, it is not; that is all right. Oh! Toddy?—why, we pitched some water over him, and H.R.H. sent somebody flying off to the refreshment tent for brandy, and they had not got any—only tea and champagne-cup, well diluted—and somebody thought of an ice, but he wouldn't have that. Oh! he came to all right. Jim Ramsay luckily had got a flask in his pocket—seems to me he generally has—and Miles is a good one for pluck, you know, and he was up again, on to his pony, and dashing into the scrimmage as fresh as ever before I came away. It is all shut up down there to-morrow."

"Deserted shades; sweet Hurlingham!" murmured Sir Edward, softly; "scene of such reminiscences: forms of the brave, and faces of the fair——"

"Bravo, Sir Edward; a little more of it, please," said Keith, laughing.

"The face of the fair," continued Sir Edward, thus encouraged, "is much averted from us this evening. Miss Erskine," he went on, bending with a sleek, insinuating smile towards her; "your fancy also surely wanders towards reminiscence—your own sweet dreams, I fear, please you better than our foolish words."

"Was I silent?" the girl answered quickly, turning upon him with direct practical interpretation of his speech. "If so, silent to listen, Sir Edward, to your poetic and suggestive remarks."

"Speak, then, and respond, and inspire further," the old beau continued. "Where did bright Éclair shed the lustre of her presence to-day?"

"I?—I spent the day in——" She paused

a moment, a quick shadow passing over her face. "I stayed at home," she continued rapidly. "Of course, for I spent it in packing. I ought to have gone to Lady Darnaway's, at Richmond, to tell the truth. She had a breakfast this afternoon. But I could not go out, you know. The last day in London one must stay at home, one has always so much to do."

"Where was Verner Carr all to-day?" cried Keith, suddenly. "He promised to meet me at two o'clock at the Corner, and to drive down to Hurlingham with me for the Guards' match, but he never turned up. Where was he? Doesn't anybody know?"

The young fellow was looking, quite unconsciously, straight at Clare as he spoke, and probably only for this cause, and quite as unconsciously, a flush of vivid colour swept over her cheek as she answered.

"I do not know," she said emphatically. "Why do you look at *me*, Charlie? I am not accountable for Major Carr."

"No. I did not mean that you were. I beg your pardon, but I thought perhaps you might have seen him. In fact, I took it for granted he had been to wish you good-bye. However, he did not turn up at Hyde Park Corner, that I know, at all events, and I waited for him a good half hour."

"Is Carr coming to Scotland?" said Hardy presently, speaking in a low, deliberate tone.

"Certainly—I hope he is," answered the Colonel. "I booked him for the end of the month as soon as he can get leave. He is not much of a fellow on the hill, you know; but he is a pleasant man in the house. Besides," continued Old George, laughing with a curious chuckle, and

shrugging his shoulders with a nervous deprecating manner that was evidently quite affected — "to tell you the truth, Mrs. Raymond Paget somehow smiled an invitation out of me the other day at Lady Mornington's, and, by Jove, Carr is the one fellow I know who is quite up to that ethereal Venus and her little ways. She is too much for me, in my old age, by Jove, she is!"

"Bless me, my deah fellah!" exclaimed Sir Edward. "That divine woman, is she coming? I do hope my engagements will enable me to trespass on the lordly hospitality of your worthy brother long enough to meet her. She is superb, my dear George, positively superb!"

"So Verner Carr thinks, I imagine," said Keith dryly. "Can't say I agree with him, however."

"But my engagements," continued Sir Edward, pulling out an embroidered memorandum-book. "Let—me—see. When did you say she was coming, Erskine?—next month? Doose take it! I do believe I'll miss her. I declare I am engaged. September; let—me—see; to the Erlingtons', for the first week. Begad, I'll write to the countess and beg off, I will; and the second, Lady Fordington, at Skyeloch; and the third, the Arthur Contines', at Glen-Farleigh, to meet the Prince and Princess. How unfortunate! The whole month bespoken—every day of it given away; and I cannot disappoint the Duchess of Strathallandale, in October, for she made *such* a point of my coming. I could not disappoint her, I could not indeed;" and Sir Edward shut up the clasp with a snap, as if his argument was conclusive against challenges

of opposition from every side, and he replaced his memorandum-book sadly in his pocket again, having aired it completely to his satisfaction — whether indeed to display the depth of his devotion to Mrs. Raymond Paget, or his own multiplicity of invitations and aristocratic engagements for the Highland season, did not transpire.

His perorations, however, did not seem much to have impressed the party, and nobody said anything in response; but a minute afterwards, Clare's eyes, wandering away out of the window again, alighted, in passing, upon Percy's face; and she turned suddenly full upon him, laughter and kindly merriment gleaming in her eye.

"Percy, Percy!" she said emphatically, "pour l'amour de Dieu, Percy, hasardez donc un mot."

He smiled up at her, and turned his

heavy blue eyes upon her face. "I'll say anything you like, Clare. Was I not speaking?"

"No," said Clare, with decided emphasis; "I really do not think you were."

"Well, let's see," he answered. "Oh, yes—Sir Edward——"

"Never mind," said Clare. "Don't rack your poor dear brain for conversation, now, at all events. Keep it, Percy, for another time. Here we are at Rugby, and it is getting quite dark. Have Ewen in and have the lamps lit up, father; then you can settle snugly to your rubber, and I will go off to bed."

"To bed?" began Sir Edward eagerly, showing his gleaming ivories once more, and hastening with a quotation—or an invention, more probably—such as he often passed off as if from some lofty source. "Fair, but——"

"Never mind," said Clare. "Keep that, too, Sir Edward, carefully with Percy's coming remark. I am too sleepy for poetry even, to-night, however flattering it may be. Good night, father! *Bon voyage* to all of us! Mr. Hardy, will you give me my volume of Ida? I see Robert or Ewen has left it up in the netting there."

They all moved to serve her, and to let her pass into the small compartment, and to repeat their "Good nights," and she disappeared through the little door, closing it fast behind her, just as the train shot into the station at Rugby, and Ewen with Sir Edward's Parisian valet appeared to inquire after their masters' well-being, and to ascertain that all their wants were supplied. The train was soon off again, and the party in the big carriage settled to their midnight whist.

CHAPTER II.

NOT FANCY FREE.

THE summer night was short, but for a few hours it was quite dark, and the stars gleamed in a clear sky. In the large saloon the lamps burnt all round the carriage, and lit it up with a warm and cheerful glow, and right on until the gleams paled before the break of the morning the five friends sat awake and lively, playing cards, smoking cigarettes, and drinking cooling bumpers of frothing wine. The night passed quickly and cheerfully, much, indeed, as it might have done

in St. James's Street at their respective clubs. But in the small end compartment things were different. Perfect quiet reigned supreme. The lamp on the carriage roof was covered and dimmed. The curtains were drawn carefully across the windows. A flutter of cool night air blew softly in at one side. All was intensely quiet and still. In one corner slumbered the French maid, luxuriously and warmly enveloped, as if the season was mid-winter and the locality the North Pole; and in the other, cosily ensconced, was Clare. Her slight figure, cased in her grey tweed, reclined back against the cushions, but in a half upright posture, for she had evidently not arranged herself, as her maid had done, in a business-like manner for a sound night's sleep. The eider-down coverlid of crimson silk was thrown lightly across her feet, and the fine-

drawn outline of her face, and the plaited coils of her hair lying against the deep red cushion on which she had pillowed her head, looked in the soft lustre of the lamp-light like a delicate Italian cameo sunk in a velvet frame. Her hands were clasped together, her white fingers, with their gleaming rings, tightly interlaced; and through all the quiet, lonely hours of the night as the train, passing station after station, swept rapidly on, she lay thus perfectly still and sleepless. Her eyes were often open and wandered slowly over the carriage, or fixed themselves unconsciously on the nearest object, on the swaying reflection of the dimmed lamps, or the gleam of one of her own rings, the light of the eyes being all the while soft and subdued. Charlie Keith or gallant Sir Edward would hardly have known Éclair as, with this altered and

most unwonted expression on her face, she lay musing the night away.

The fact was, the whole of the past season seemed flitting before her during these hours, and many memories came crowding in that retrospect and chasing her sleep away. Sunny memories of mornings when her father's drag or her own victoria had drawn up at the Corner by the Ride, and the chestnut blossoms had gleamed snow-white or rose-tinted amid the fresh spring verdure above their heads; when the gay crowd on foot or on horseback had trooped to and fro, and the echo of laughter had filled the sultry air, and the mingling of voices had reached her like the silvery murmurings of a distant fountain; and the whole scene had been fair for her, and their gay world had seemed bright and brilliant as it had never done before. Never!

Not even in the first quite early days, when at sixteen the glittering pleasure cup had been placed in her hand, raised to her young lips for the first time, and she had been gaily told to drink—not then even had sunshine gleamed so sweetly, or life looked so bewitching, as it had often done through the season now over. Oh, those summer mornings that had but just gone from her—how lovely they had been! how gloriously the sun had shone in God's azure heavens! how it had flooded down upon her! how she had loved it! What strange power, she wondered, could have prevailed this year to shed that sweet mystic glow over the well-beaten and common daily track of a London season, until it had gleamed bright and delectable like a snow-white pathway to Paradise?

And with these memories came many

others—some of evenings hot and still, when, among her flowers on her small canopied balcony in Curzon Street, she had sat and listened, and in low-whispered murmurs replied, to *what* she could not well remember! Only single words came back to her, and quick sentences, dropped furtively and hastily, as if unawares. All this flowed as with the soft rise and fall of a heaving summer's wave across her memory as she lay still and sleepless; and the very scent of her flowers, and the fragrance of delicate cigarette smoke, and the sultry heaviness of the night seemed to mock her again, as she closed her eyes softly while it all came back upon her—and a faint sigh of tender pleasure in the retrospect escaped her parted lips. How many scenes like this there were to remember! How many nights in the glittering ball-rooms, and

afternoons beneath the chestnuts' shades at Hurlingham! where the four trotting bays would take the laden coach; where her father shot, and Keith and Percy rushed into the polo fray; and Sir Edward lingered to murmur many things questionable and tender to Mrs. Raymond Paget (who often drove down with them); and she, Clare—left free to follow her own sweet wits, with no anxious chaperone to ask any questions or to bustle after her—sauntered the bright bright hours through, by the cool water-side.

"And has it come to this?" she murmured to herself. "Come to this—that without a blush, a ridiculous, school-girl blush, I cannot hear his name! Verner! Verner Carr! To think that I have come to it!—I, Clare Erskine—I!" It seemed an exasperating thought, and yet a very pleasant one, for she smiled again softly as she

vituperated herself. "Quite absurd!" she continued. "Verner, Verner!" and with a wistful lingering accent she again and again repeated his name. Absurd it might have been, as Clare may have had very good cause to know, but if absurd, none the less unquestionable was the soft confession in those murmuring words. Verner Carr had won a central place for himself in these sweet retrospective dreams. Gradually her thoughts progressed onwards and became concentrated upon the event of the season's close; on the last week, the last day or two, and the very last time she had seen him—just twenty-four hours ago. "Surely it was just that time exactly." She drew out her little watch very furtively and with noiseless fingers. It was half-past one o'clock. "Yes," she had thought, "so it was—twenty-four hours ago," and Lady

Arnot's impromptu "after breakfast" dance at Surley was just over, and the carriages were already rolling away, as she stood close down by the rushing stream below the gardens, and the summer moon was glowing fiery and red, while the smell of new-mown hay, with the heavy scent from the lime trees above their heads, filled all the air as they said "Good-bye." And though it was quite absurd, for there was little more in his parting speech save that word "Good-bye" to remember, yet she smiled softly as she remembered it again, for there had been a light in his eyes as he said it that still glowed deep in her heart's reflection,—there had been an eagerness in his clasp of her two hands, and a mournful accent in his voice that lingered still in the echoes of her memory, and that whispered the strong conviction that the parting was yet more

painful to him than to her. To her it was scarcely painful; she looked to see him in Scotland before the month was over, and hopes of the future drew all sting from the regretful memories of the past. Indeed, Verner Carr had been very careful to secure his invitation to the Glen.

Then Clare laughed to herself and at herself, because all that day she had stayed at home on pretence of packing (as if Fanlie indeed would let her touch a thing), and she had expected—she thought she knew not whom she had expected—but it was certainly some one who never came. Where had he been, that Charlie Keith had not seen him? How silly of her to expect him! He had said "Good-bye." What made her fancy he might have something still to say to her? How foolish to have such fancies! How very foolish indeed!

And yet—and yet—Verner's eyes with that glowing look in them, Verner's voice with that intonation so soft, so thrilling, so low! Back, back, came the recollection of it all again and again to her, until she almost felt there was no more need for words. What could he say, indeed, that he had not already that season looked or implied? She thought all her girlish thoughts of him until she was tired and could think no longer; she dreamt her rosy dreams until they grew dim and cloudy, and seemed to lose themselves in soft mystic light, and then—surely she must have slept a little, for the night seemed gone all suddenly, and she opened her eyes once more to behold the silver rays of a summer's daybreak piercing through the closed curtain, and the lamp paling before the coming sun. She started up suddenly and pushed back

her hair. Had she been asleep, and how long? Had the night skimmed past as she lay there, and had that last pleasing vision been a real sleeping dream? She scarcely knew; but the hours had certainly glided swiftly and sweetly by. What a silvery light of dawn that was that shone round her now in the carriage! and how pale and wretched the little lamp looked that had seemed to glow so warm and bright behind its covering an hour or two ago! and how still was the morning! Her maid still slept and snorted gently; and from the next compartment came no echo of loud laughter, or clang of voices in noisy, merry talk—all there had now gone to sleep, too. The whist was over, and the players, each packed up in his corner, snoozed cosily beneath ulster and rug. No sound thence reached Clare, only the dull

steady whirl of the wheels as the rapid train swept on. She pulled out her watch again, but it had stopped, of course, and she had no more chance for a long time of discovering the hour; and she was so wide awake, and the morning was so soft and beautiful, it seemed impossible to lie down again to sleep. So after a minute or two she pushed back the curtains and looked out of the window at the swiftly passing scene, and instantly her eyes sparkled and her cheek flushed with delight. How lovely it was—the soft break of the morning far away in the horizon of the summer's earth and sky! The pale stars still struggled faintly, high in the archway of the heavens, but the sun was chasing them fast. Away to the far east he was coming—still invisible—but heralded right royally by rolling morning clouds of crimson and gold.

Vast green fields, studded with sheep and cattle, undulated before her eyes, and hedge-rows, lying neatly between them, stretched far away.

There were little points in the country, in the aspect of the hamlets they passed, in the small stations through which they flew, that caught Clare's attention immediately. She drew her breath quickly for an instant, and her eyes glowed; she looked again from side to side, and watched eagerly a moment, and then—"Scotland! Scotland!"

The words burst from her lips. "We have crossed the Border. We are flying through ——shire. Darling Scotland! here we are on Scottish ground once more!"

And she gazed and laughed low again, kissing her finger-tips lightly to greet the country of her constant love; and up rose the glorious August sun right in her glad

eyes, across the green fields and the hedge-rows, and answered her joyous greetings with a radiant morning smile. And she looked still over the glowing pastures, shaded her eyes with her hand that she might gaze better upon the light, till the beauty and full sublimity of the scene swept over her heart and reached the pure fountains of her spirit's tenderest depths, and words broke again from her—sweet reverent words of glory to the heavenly Father and Former of all things, who had made her life so bright, her heart so happy, and the beloved land of her nativity, even here in its green southern slopes in all its morning splendour, so wondrously bright and fair. A short time ago, her soft and dreamy thoughts had been all concentrated and individual—possessed, as it might be, of herself, or more properly, indeed, of another, with

regard to or as he concerned herself. Now, her young heart, which answered like a sweet instrument with true musical harmonies beneath the hand that swept over its chords—her heart seemed to expand under the influence of this morning scene in all its heavenly beauty, and with the thrilling knowledge that she was once more in that dear northern land of her birth. It was a noble young heart; it could expand widely, and it loved beyond all self, all personality, many great, deep, intangible things. She gazed and her heart glowed; she gazed still, and her cheeks flushed and her eyes glistened full of joyous tears; while her thoughts wandered away back to her early girlhood among the mountains, in the still far-away North; and then they wandered on hither and thither across her life, and then back they came, by a strange,

circuitous, but most certain road, back to their new glowing centre, to the sweet fresh spring fountain of all her young dreams.

"Verner!" she murmured again. "How I wish Verner was a Scotchman! I always said I never would—would what? Marry a Southerner? How silly I am! But still, Verner, what may he—what can he mean? or can I doubt, indeed, what he *does*, what he must mean? And when he comes to the Glen, what will my uncle say? and cousin Marion? I will tell cousin Marion all about it instantly, and in a little while I am quite sure I won't mind a bit telling uncle too. Oh, I hope they will like him, I hope they will think him worthy—not of me, he is far too good for me, I know—but of the Glen, of the dear old Glen. I will tell them all about it, and they must love him; for my sake they will love him, though uncle

Lairdie is sure to call him a 'Sassenach lad.' Well, my own mother was a Sassenach, and they have loved me dearly all the same. Oh, they must love him; how can they help it? I know, I know they will." For a moment her thoughts seemed suspended, and she gazed dreamily upon the passing scene and on the morning sky. Her eyes were growing heavy again, her brain was tired with the long journeying, with the rapid, giddy whirling through the night air, and her thoughts seemed to get misty once more, forming themselves into sweet, half-dreamy visions in her vivid and fanciful mind. Her head sank upon the crimson pillow again. She partly drew the curtain across. She could still see the glimmer of the deepening sky; a pale, fading star caught her eye suddenly, still just faintly visible as it sank away slowly before the morning light. "How

frivolous they seem!" she thought again. "How small all our little dreams and fancies, and personal likes and hopes and wishes, before the grandeur of such a rising day! before the earth in its morning glory, before the sun in his splendour, before light and clouds and tempest, and all the mystic and aerial things that Everett Hardy loves! and still more how little they all seem when I think of cousin Marion and what she thinks and feels! Would she say that *my* love, if I dare call it love—this wondrous, dreamy feeling of mine for Verner Carr, that gives such a new mysterious beauty to every corner of the earth for me, to every moment of my life,—would *she* say that before Divine love, such as *she* knows and worships, it fades as that star of the midnight fades before the rising sun? And yet, cousin Marion, you will not despise it, I

know; you will listen, I know; you will help me—you will sympathize. For what used you to teach me long ago, at the old Glen, in very idle, schoolgirl days—that the stars gleaming softly bright, giving beauty to our most wintry night, are but reflections caught from the sun in his radiance, and part of the same great light—one of a single glorious whole? And so, cousin Marion, you will see my thought. Love, even weak, little, frivolous, selfish, earthly love like mine, comes just from the same source, is part of the same wondrous power that, in its sublime and unselfish glory, makes a pure saint's life of yours."

I do not think her thoughts travelled further. She did not mean to sleep again—the morning was far too lovely; her dreams were far too fair; but it happened somehow, the eyelids closed, the dark lashes dropped

and lay still upon her cheeks. Time passed, and she took no count of its passing, until hour had rolled swiftly after hour, and the sun was hot and high in the heavens, and her father's cheery voice broke in upon her dreams.

"My love, are you stirring? Ma'm'selle Fanlie, look alive! you must get ready for breakfast, and in double quick time, too, for in ten minutes more we shall be at Perth."

CHAPTER III.

NEXT MORNING.

I HAVE frequently gone to sleep at Paris and woke up (so to speak) at Marseilles; have parted with daylight in the gloomy streets and woolly sky of an afternoon in drizzling November, and found it again with a morning sun flashing upon the Mediterranean and glistening upon the olive woods; and I have passed out of a daytime existence, too, on a grey, dull day, in the far northern corner of France, near the borders of Belgium, and woke to realize it again with the Bay of

Biscay stretching broadly before me, the sun shining gloriously on distant Spanish hills, and the "white horses" that crest the long rolling waves that break over the bar of Bayonne, glittering in snowy beauty and throwing up their silvery spray in crystal flakes against the sky.

And each and all of these experiences were delightful, but in my frank opinion not one of them can compare with the real exhilaration and enjoyment of that journey by which we leave London, hot, suffocating, and sun-scorched, at 8 p.m., behind us, and find ourselves in the fresh, free air of the Scottish mountains by breakfast-time next morning at Perth.

Who has not enjoyed that excellent breakfast—those "Finnan haddies," and marmalade, the fresh country butter, the Scotch "baps," and the cream; and the

cheery faces and the Highland welcomes and greetings; the mingling of voices and the quaint combination of nationalities going on all round; and the stir and the bustle and all the pleasant excitement, as everybody eats and laughs and talks, and rejoices in the long night journey being over, the Highlands attained once more, and the pleasures of the season all to come before them?

The Perth station was in a state of special excitement this morning when our party arrived.

It was true, as Keith had said, that the train of H.R.H. the Prince of Wales was coming fast and close behind them, and the station was gaily decorated and carpeted with crimson cloth. The refreshment-table was covered with flowers, private apartments upstairs were all ready for the Royal party,

and the countenances of Mr. Macdonald and his staff glowed with an extra degree of enthusiastic solicitude, for the success of the occasion, and for the comfort of their numerous hungry guests of every sort and degree.

Colonel George Erskine and his party were well known, as it happened, to the Prince; Old George had shot many a cover in Lincolnshire and Suffolk in H.R.H.'s society, and had played many a quiet rubber with him in Pall Mall besides; so he stood attention as the "special" ran in, and was ready, as the party trooped across the crimson carpet, with his own particular salute. He was sure of the kind recognition and greeting which, indeed, on this occasion did not fail him, and which certainly redounded greatly, in the eyes of his surrounding countrymen, to the credit of the

house of Erskine in general, and to himself, Old George, in particular, as a man of fashion, distinction, and mark.

Then, loyalty being duly demonstrated and acknowledged, they all hurried off to breakfast; and Sir Edward Hartopp, who had been missing during the Royal reception, re-appeared, emerging, as was evident, from the hands of his French valet, quite rejuvenated after the wear and tear of the night. He had a fresh wig, he wore speckless and shining boots, a snowy shirt front, and a new suit of tweed of a lovely light heather mixture that invited Clare's admiration immediately.

"Dear Sir Edward, I must have a pattern; it is too pretty!" she exclaimed. "Perfect for the moor, father, is it not? exactly the tint of the heather when the purple has just a little gone."

"Excellent!" said her father. "Trust Hartopp to come out on all occasions just in *the* thing, my dear."

"Ah, for the moor, you know," began the old gentleman, "one must have something suitable, and Varlet found me this. Do you find it becoming? Ah, well, yes—I am so glad you think so."

"Most appropriate," said Clare. "But when is not Sir Edward faultlessly appropriate in the harmonies of costume?"

"But begin your breakfast, my dear fellow," exclaimed the Colonel. "Begin and get on. I assure you the first bell will go directly. Keith and Percy have finished theirs long ago."

"Hah, just a snack of something," murmured Sir Edward, delicately. "Ah, yes, —let me see,—a cup of tea, my dear young lady, from such fair fingers,—thanks a

thousand times. Yes, ah, the aroma, I do assure you——"

"Hang the aroma!" exclaimed his old friend. "You snack away at something as fast as you can. That is right, Clare, you pour him out another cup of tea. Halloa, there goes the bell! Your Monsieur Varlet took too long over the curling tongs this morning, Hartopp. Come away, old fellow; there is not a moment to lose. They are going to run us very punctual to get us past Stanley Junction before they start the Prince."

A few hours more and they were running smoothly along in the glorious sunshine of a cloudless August day, over the higher level, up among the breezy hills; the purple heather, in tufted knolls or undulating moorlands, stretching away before them on either side, glowing with the rich deep tints of the time of year.

Far away to the right and left rose many a grey rugged crag piercing the archway of a sky that seemed smiling in summer's gladness above them, soft and transparent, —a wonderfully clear celestial blue. It was an open unwooded country, with a wild free air blowing fresh over hill and moorland, with only patches of the red-stemmed pine clustering here and there in a rocky crevice, and groups of the weeping birch nestling by a tarn side or by the fringe of a rushing stream. The sun shone on the ruddy brown of the pine stem and lit softly the silver bark of the birch, glistening upon their feathery foliage, and dropping a dewy light upon each trembling leaf.

The party in the large saloon were a little tired, and much quieter in consequence, than when they had started in such boisterous and noisy spirits the night before.

Charlie Keith was sound asleep, no disguise or affectation about it. The midnight whist throughout the whirling journey had been too much for him, and, with his head uncovered, and leaning back against the carriage side, he snoozed the bright hours comfortably away.

Sir Edward read the evening paper he had brought in his pocket from town, with a golden double eyeglass resting on his nose; he sat erect and youthful and alert as usual. Everett Hardy had managed to reach a corner by Clare's side, and Percy also sat next to her. They were all three somewhat quiet and subdued; the sun was hot and the hour mid-day, and the morning had been long and full of excitement.

Clare's heart, indeed, still beat with that keen excitement which repetition and custom never seemed to wear out, that thrilled her

always anew, as if each year were quite the first time she had drunk in the keen sweet air—sniffed the wild scent of the pine and heather—caught a glimpse of a brown, scared grouse, floating heavily away upon his broad wings—watched the sun glitter upon the distant lochs, or the rocky hills rear their noble crests against the summer sky. Her heart beat and her eyes shone with intense excitement and pleasure, but she was quiet as the rest were, and only murmured a running commentary in criticism as she glanced from the changeful panoramic view on to the sketch-book which Everett Hardy held in his skilful hands, and to which he transferred rapid impressions of bits of mountain light and shadow, of groups of feathery birch and of tall-stemmed rugged pine; of a cottage gable as they paused at one station, of a Highland

pony browsing in the parson's glebe as they stopped at another; of rough shepherd with staff and plaid, or old woman in mutch and tartan, or bare-footed children with yellow locks and sun-tanned rosy skins.

Old George made most of the conversation.

"Begad," he said, as they came up the higher level,—and he made the same remark nearly every year,—"when I think of the old days of travelling on the coach-top across this windy moor; of the snow-drift in the winter, and the long weary journey it used to be, backwards and forwards in August and November, up to the Glen! Begad, it is quite wonderful!"

"My father used to come up here," answered Percy, who often took up a line of quiet conversation when the rest of the party had talked as much as was possible to them, and were for the moment silent.

"My father had a shooting up there, Colonel, beyond Strathspey. He was one of the first who came up, you know, and he brought me with him once when I was quite a little bit of a chap."

"Eh! quite right, quite right," said the Colonel. "That was how you got your taste for the Scotch moors and the salmon pools, my boy."

"I suppose so. I have always had it," said Percy. "Scotland beats everything, I think."

"So it does, by Jove, it does!" exclaimed old Erskine, enthusiastically. "On a day like this, my dear fellow, upon my honour it is glorious!—and I am blessed if there is not an old grouse! Look, out there, Percy, rising quite close beyond that patch of corn-field! I declare he is within gunshot. By Jove!" and the old man cocked the silver-

handled walking-stick he carried, scientifically up to his eye, and measured his distance, giving a chuckle of much anticipated enjoyment, and uttering a low clicking sound in imitation of his gun-lock. "Hurrah for the moors! My brother writes me word that everything is most uncommon fit this year."

"That is a fine effect," murmured Everett to Clare just then. "Look, where the birch is sweeping low over the waters on that little loch down there; how clear the reflections are! how transparent! Are we going to stop? Yes. Famous; I believe I can just get it in."

"Charming!" Clare answered. "You will have a lovely journal, Everett, to-day."

For Hardy's pocket sketch-book went by the name of "the journal" among the party, and was always in requisition as a lasting

chronicle of the very ephemeral incidents of their life. It was not always treated with respect, however, at least by Keith and Percy, and so the former, happening to wake at the moment, just in time to overhear Everett's softly murmured remark, uttered an imitative addendum in slow, meditative tones, saying, "Ya-as, that is a fine effect, Everett. Lovely!—delicious!—especially that red cow—look! her tail droops so gracefully towards us! how lucky it hangs this way!"

"Not half so fine an effect, my dear boy, as that donkey in the corner there, who has just woke up and begun to bray," said Everett, good humouredly. "Do keep still one moment, only one, and I shall have immortalized him for a grateful posterity." And he sketched away.

In ten minutes Clare's merry laugh rang

through the carriage as Everett held up his book to her, and then handed it on to Keith. A vivid likeness of that young gentleman appeared, reclining in a grotesque attitude, with heels on one seat, and head on another, with long ears, and with a dainty, Liliputian figure carefully traversing the chasms between the sofas by the way of his extended legs. "*Pons asinorum*" Everett had scribbled underneath before he tossed the book across the carriage to Charlie.

"Not half so effective as my cow," said Keith, conclusively, as he stretched over to give the sketch again into Clare's hands. "Everett's art is graceful, but I must say his wit is poor. Ah, here we are at Kinruasach Junction."

They all roused themselves to look about them at this station, and the Colonel

protruded his grey shoulders and greyer head right out of the window, and shook hands with the Laird of Cluanich, who, in his eagle plumes and tartan plaid, had come to meet some friends by the southern train. Then, as the laird moved off, several other welcomes, hearty and warm, greeted Old George, as he recognized acquaintances of divers grades and classes, and hailed from the window many an old friend. Everybody knew him.

"Hech! Cornal Erskine!" the exclamation echoed up often to them in the carriage. "Is't yersel'? Gled to see ye i' the North again. It is the laird will be weel plased to get ye up at the Glen. And hoo's the young leddy?" was the frequent rejoinder.

"Quite well, thank ye," was the Colonel's invariable answer. "I have got her in here all right."

"Eh, sir! that's weel. You hae a fine day for yer jourrny."

"Capital! Glorious weather; and how are the crops?"

"Most uncommon dry; been a drooght, sir, since the 'ool mairket o'er a' the country side."

"'Gad, that is bad. What—are we going? Starting again? Good day, Fraser. Ah, Macleod, is that you? Here we are again, you see, faithful to the old country. By Jove, we *are* off! Good-bye, Cluanich; very glad to have seen you; my best respects to your Lady. Halloa, did I tread on your toes, Hartopp? A thousand pardons. By Jove, it is awfully pleasant to see the 'ken't' faces, and to feel we are really in the old country once more!"

And the Colonel sat down in his place very hot and exhausted by the enthusiasm

and excitement of the rapid greetings he had exchanged.

After that the train took it very leisurely. They had time to finish their champagne and the remains of a *pâté de fois gras*, and sundry welcome packets of chicken sandwiches that still lurked in the hampers, before this long railway journey approached its close, and they came running swiftly in at the foot of the steep incline along the level bit by the sea shore beyond Fort Edward, towards the top of Portalloch Bay.

The bay—or the firth, as in these parts we call it—shone smooth as a mirror, beneath the afternoon rays of the August sun. Delicate shadowy reflections skimmed over its glistening surface, and the undulating outline of the hills on the opposite coast rose darkly against the sky.

The corn waved ripe and golden in the

fields, a white, dry mist hung low in the summer air, and away in the far distance, at the head of the glittering gulf, the hills of Strathcarlich stood out grey and mysterious amidst the clouds that gathered softly before the declining sun.

When, with valets, hampers, luggage, and the French maid, they were all finally deposited on the platform at Portalloch, it was just half-past two o'clock.

The mail was punctual for a wonder, just because on that day in particular nobody had expected it to be so; but such is the way of trains, and so it was, that there were not nearly so many people as usual on these occasions, to recognize and greet Colonel Erskine, to shake him by the hand, to bid him welcome to the North again, and to tell him about the crops and the grouse.

So they all got through wonderfully fast,

with their piles of luggage and their masses of gun-cases and portmanteaus. And the whole party, with Ewen and the Parisian, and Percy and Keith's respective "men," hurried through a curious and very non-descript meal at the big hotel at the station, and once more, quite indefatigable, started again.

This time it was not by the train. At the hotel door—as they emerged after their rapid luncheon—there stood in waiting for them a large *fourgon*, with seats ranged back to back, drawn by a pair of capital horses, and driven by a coachman in the same livery as the tall London footman wore, whose duty in life seemed to be the care of the private property of Clare Erskine, from her fishing-rod to her French maid.

Behind the *fourgon* stood a big brake,

drawn by a pair of strong, rough-coated horses, evidently borrowed for the occasion from the home farm. Into this was piled the luggage and all the valets, while Clare's maid was elevated to the box of the *fourgon*, and all the rest of the party were packed inside; and away they went once more.

Now, I am not going to mention what road they took—which street, as they left the station, they turned up or down; but there are several different ways they may have gone. Portalloch, as most people know, lies in a valley—a soft, fertile, lovely valley, watered by the broad, rushing river from which the town takes its name. It is a glorious river, not a thin, muddy stream across which a man might almost jump (such as I have heard called a river in places I could name), but a great body of water, flowing lordly and majestic like the Rhine

in some parts, and rushing wildly in tumultuous eddies in many others—so wide that, far from jumping it, a man might shout across with the full power of the most stentorian lungs, and his words be scarcely understood by the keenest pair of ears on the other side; so deep that they fish salmon with the net and coble as well as with the skilful rod.

It is a smiling river in the summer sunshine, and sparkles with infinite variety of sweet lights, and changeful, bewitching beauties; but it rises often, deep and terrible with the wintry tempest, swells proudly above its banks, and dashes with alarming force against the pillars of the bridge.

The town stretches along both its banks and circles round the wide sea bay at the river's mouth. There are relics of an old town, and something, too, of the quaint

spirit of an old town, traceable just here and there—in the kirk with its ancient pointed spire, in the old fort on the ramparts by the sea, in a venerable house hidden away here and there in secluded corners, and in a few time-honoured customs which at civic board or session linger from ancient days.

But, on the whole, it must be admitted that Portalloch has assumed decidedly the air of modern times. As it now stands, it seems indeed a natural and spontaneous outcome of these changeful times, and the spirit of stirring and utilitarian enterprise which is at work there is just that same modern spirit which is everywhere abroad.

The change has been marvellous in its rapidity. "Given a railway station in these days," as is said somewhere, "and everything will come naturally in its train,"—from new

streets, terraces, and bridges, new schools, clubs, and societies, to new religions and new cathedrals, new customs, and new ideas.

So nothing seems to have stood unchanged in Portalloch, save the river, which still, as of old, rushes passionately, winding quietly through the islands, and eddying madly round the bridge—still singing its old songs and telling its old tales, still laden with strange memories, still full of deep suggestion, murmuring its undying histories of an ancient past.

There were two roads which the party in the *fourgon* might have taken *across* the river: by the upper bridge, round by the new cathedral, and away to the west—or by the lower bridge, whence, after crossing the canal at the Strome Lock, they might have skirted the firth along a level road through a green and fertile country, and then either

turned up through the hills towards the straths, or driven on round the bay's head into the neighbouring shire on the opposite side. Or, without crossing the river, they might have left Portalloch by the Castle Hill, and climbed the long, rough road to Strathairnach. Indeed, any of these roads they may have followed, or one of several others that I still might name—but this is no matter. Suffice to say, that the glorious long summer's day was quite drawing to its close, and the twilight falling sweetly over mountain and heather and stream, when the sound of their carriage wheels coming over the road, still far away by the loch-side, penetrated through the wide-opened window into the drawing-room of the old grey castle at "The Glen," and brought the laird and his daughter instantaneously to the front door.

CHAPTER IV.

"THE DUCHUS."

UNDER the shadow of his quaint old porch stood Patrick Moray-Erskine, of The Glen, the twin-brother of Old George, and his senior in their entry, seventy years ago, upon this world, by about ten minutes. The time was short, but quite long enough to constitute that wide difference in their position and career which made George from his youngest days a vagrant wanderer, and established Patrick as the Laird of the Glen.

It was impossible to conceive a greater

contrast in appearance, in characteristics, and in the seventy years' histories of their respective lives, than was evident between the twin-brothers. They resembled each other in nothing save their finely developed figures and their height.

Old George was such a man as you may see any day at Hyde Park Corner, in a country house where a shooting party is assembled, in a box at Melton, or on a Highland moor.

Patrick was a man rare in his own day, met then once in a lifetime—now scarcely anywhere to be met at all. He was as handsome at seventy as he had been at twenty-five, because his beauty was in a smile that never faded, and in a sweet, changeful light in clear, sparkling eyes that years had no apparent power to dim. His hair, scarely touched with grey, and still abundant, swept back in waves of dark

chestnut from a forehead, furrowed indeed, but still frank and unclouded. He had been as active and energetic a man in his own way, as his brother had been in his; but he had not now, at this advanced age, the same smart, youthful look in his tall figure, for he stooped slightly at the shoulders, and his head was often bent forward as he walked or stood meditating in silence. He held it still high, however, when in conversation, and there was a sparkling, vivid look of keen intelligence in his expression then, as he smiled straight out upon the world with his wonderful, clear, hazel eyes. They were bright as the orbs of an eagle, soft and full of pathos like the brown velvet eyes of a stag. Their brilliancy was quite remarkable; and as it has been somewhere said, of all the chiefs of races among mountaineers, "their brightness was their vail," covering much deep

reserve of character, speaking simply a glow of genial kindness in intercourse with common men, behind which it was often difficult to read the real thought. With an intense warmth and simplicity of manner that was singularly winning, and also entirely genuine, Patrick Erskine combined a character that was unusually self-contained and reserved. The combination made him very interesting, for there was no limit to the possibilities of taste and mind, of thought, of fancy, and of active life and spirit to be found beyond. As he stood in the door of the old porch his glance was *all* radiance and anticipation, all eagerness and joy. They were coming!

Cousin Marion stood beside him; where she had stood, indeed, through all the sweet years of her most beautiful life. And she was his daughter—in every respect and

detail of appearance, character, sensibilities, and interests, in which it was possible for a noble woman to inherit and to reflect the history and the individuality of another. Father and daughter—for six and forty years they had lived out their lives together. She was of tall stature and erect carriage, and her colouring was like her father's: her hair a rich dark chestnut, her complexion of soft olive tint. Like him, she had those eyes of the eagle and of the stag—and like his, her smile flashed as sun-rays upon the water spray—soft, brilliant, and changeful, full of eagerness, and yet with that touch of pathos, too; the smile was tremulous and tender, as if all the heart was in it, recalling ever that line of Heine's, speaking of "the sadness of a smile and the sweetness of a tear." Both seemed ready and near the surface at this moment,

as Marion, with an emotion that was almost painful in the depth and intensity of her great joy, stood listening to the wheels that came approaching, quick, and close. The carriage wended slowly along the road above them, and as the sound drew near several of the old servants gathered from different directions, and stood watching for the arrival, as eagerly as their master and mistress in the porch. The gardener peeped round the corner of the old house; the butler, a very fat old gentleman, stood, with glowing cheeks, just behind the laird.

Every window was opened to the soft evening air, and at most of them appeared some eager, kindly face, nearly all as venerable in aspect as the clustering ivy by which each window was framed.

The approach wound curiously, passing through a pine wood right above the house

before it turned sharp round and descended fair upon it; and as the heavily-laden carriages slowly made the difficult curve, they faced suddenly upon the open view—upon the loch lying low at their feet, full of deep reflection, but intensely still, not a wave or ripple troubling its shadowy surface; upon the quaint, old-fashioned garden, bright with its wealth of summer flowers; on the green, sloping bank and broad, undulating lawns, that stretched away to the water's edge; on the old grey house, wreathed in smoke that rose heavily from the big kitchen chimneys and hung low over the roof in the still evening air; and upon the group in the house porch—the laird, with his big hound lying near him, Marion standing by his side, old Macroy peeping behind his shoulders, and Riach the gardener peering round the wall.

Down the steep slope they drove slowly, with the quaint house, and the view of loch, and hills, and lawn, and garden, looking intensely still and peaceful in the fading light.

"Here they come!" and the carriage wound slowly in sight.

"Here you are! here you are, at last!" came from the old laird.

"Here we are, hurrah!" shouted his brother. "My dear boy, how are ye?"

And as the carriage stopped, he stooped down, and, in a mute, unutterable greeting, the laird clasped his hand.

"Eh, Geordie, how are ye?"

"Quite well, my boy; and how are you? Looking as hale as ever, I do declare."

"Pretty well, I thank ye,—and Clare?"

There was a bustle of descent before he could reach Clare, and the girl, like him

and like Marion, was quite silent from the intensity of her gladness, from the force of strong emotion, that surged up in her heart.

"Eh, my Clare!" was all the old laird said.

"Uncle Lairdie, Uncle Lairdie!" she answered, and the young arms were tight round his neck. For one instant the stately head bent over her, and the old man gently kissed her cheek. He said little more, but as she passed from him to Marion's close embrace, there was a tear lingering upon the soft cheek, that, dropped in silence, spoke more than many words.

The laird had his brother's friends to greet.

"Here we are, my dear sir, in force as usual," exclaimed Sir Edward, as he stepped gingerly down, and the laird bowed just a

little stiffly as he touched the old baronet's eagerly outstretched hand.

"And you are as welcome as ever," he said quietly. "Mr. Hardy, I am glad to see you! Brought all the paint-pots and brushes, I hope. How are you, Captain Keith? I hope your worthy father is well; and Mr. Bligh! Eh, so you are not going to Norway this season? We shall be afraid to boast of our Highland rivers to *you* now, after all the fine sport I heard about last year."

"Do not believe a word of it, Laird," said Percy, as he shook hands heartily with the old gentleman. "Norway can't hold a candle to the Highlands, take it any way you like all round."

Percy's particular phraseology seemed quite comprehensible to his host, and completely satisfactory as well.

He laughed as he continued, "You must be very tired, every one of you. What a long journey you have had, to be sure! doing it all, too, in one run like this. Surely too much for Clare, George, eh?"

"No, my dear fellow, she likes it. She slept as sound as a top in the train the whole way, you know. It's nothing, it's nothing in these days, I assure you. By Jove, Pat, the old place looks well. And, eh! Macroy," he continued, breaking suddenly into broad Scotch, as he caught sight of the old butler, peering eagerly beyond his brother's shoulder. "Hoo are ye? I hope y'r weel, and Mistress Macroy, and the bairnies, eh!"

"Hech, they're fine, Cornal; and it's mysel' is gled to see ye at the Glen, yoursel' and the bonnie young leddy. Eh, but it's a

braw young leddy o' her we hae gotten noo indeed."

"Well, Macroy, and how is everybody?" Clare exclaimed in a gleeful tone to him, turning upon the old man with both hands extended, and smiling with a sweet sunny glance into his face. "You look younger than ever, Macroy; and is everybody quite well?"

"Hech, they're a' nicely, Miss Clare. Hoot toot, come awa', come awa' into the hoose!" and, somewhat embarrassed by so much direct notice before such fine company, Macroy bustled into the little hall to open the house door for them, and to indicate the way towards the dining-room and supper. But they had not half done enjoying their arrival yet.

"Charming, charming!" Sir Edward was murmuring.

He had been making polite bows and speeches all this time to Miss Erskine, a lady whom he always described, "As a doosed fine woman, be dad, sir;" but of whom, while in her presence, he was not a little afraid.

"I always repeat," he continued, "that that drive here, winding above the lake, madam, is the loveliest thing I know in Europe, unless it be the Corniche road by the Mediterranean, and, indeed, it resembles it extremely."

"So I have been told," Miss Erskine answered. "People often say so, but I have to take the comparison from hearsay. I am not acquainted with the Italian scenery myself."

"Indeed, not so!" said Sir Edward, with polite surprise, and then he continued a little conversation, poetically descriptive, with

Miss Erskine, in a set of concise speeches, with which indeed he opened this course of autumn conversation nearly every year. "A doosed well-read and well-informed woman," he was in the habit of calling this excellent lady; "and agreeable, by Jove, and full of information, though, I give you my word, sir, she has lived up in those wilds of hers for the most of her life. An astonishing woman!"

When George had first brought him up there, indeed, and had described, as they drove by the loch-side, the secluded Highland life which it pleased his brother with his only daughter for all these years to lead, Sir Edward had formed curious notions to himself of the lady he was about to visit, and so it happened, he never again recovered his astonishment at finding Marion such as she was—a high-bred woman, with refine-

ment and composure of manners fitted for a court, with a very cultivated intelligence, and with (what most surprised Sir Edward) a power of speaking English almost equal to his own.

He had expected a style of address and accent of which his ideas were acquired entirely from Sir Walter Scott, and referred to the eighteenth and not the nineteenth century; but he found both father and daughter speaking English as pure and educated as he had ever heard, and of which the soft voice in which it was uttered and a peculiarly musical intonation in the rise and fall, were the only characteristics that pointed to a nationality.

He had all his set little phrases to repeat, while the others grouped round him, and the carriages drove off to the stables, and they paused in the little old hall.

Clare pushed out to the door again when her first greetings were over, and Everett had turned out along with her. They stood gazing a moment, glancing once at each other in the sympathy of delight and enjoyment, and then quite silently they listened.

The air was laden with soft summer sounds, all mingled in confusion, all intensely suggestive, and soothing, and indescribably sweet, and above all rose a curious, dull, rushing noise, like the far-away whirl of a great city, or like—nothing else but what it was.

"The falls, the falls!" Clare murmured. "Everett, how full they are! Cousin Marion, you have had a great deal of rain here lately?"

"A good deal," she answered. "The July floods have not gone down yet here,

although, indeed, it is the only part of the country where they have much. In Badenoch they are calling out for rain."

"The falls have plenty," Clare continued, as she listened with brightened eye.

"What a sound it is!" murmured Everett, leaning his head on one side to hear. "The sort of sound one dreams of, or tries to recall to make one fall asleep, when one is thousands of miles away; is it not? Listen, what a wonderful whirr and rush!"

"Dear old falls! Everett," whispered Clare. "Let us go and look at them."

"With all my heart."

"Come along, then," she eagerly rejoined.

"Clare, Clare, come in to tea! Don't go out in the night dew, my dear child," came cousin Marion's voice in expostulation. "Where are you going?"

"Oh, cousin Marion, just for one minute

only, Mr. Hardy and me. We must go; but we will run all the way. Let me, do let me go."

"My dear child, but supper is ready—waiting ever so long ago."

"Oh, but one little ten minutes won't matter, cousin Marion. Father, I may go! Oh, uncle Lairdie, beg for me; I must see the falls!"

"You will see them in moonlight, then," said her uncle, laughing at her eager, impetuous face.

"You must run the whole way then, Éclair," said her father; "and not stay a minute, and come back before cousin Marion's tea has brewed. Take care of her, Hardy; do not let her fall over the edge."

And they were off. Through the deepening twilight they started running together, and as they turned the corner of the old

house, the August moon rose as the laird had expected, with glorious splendour, right over the loch beyond the dark hills that fringed the opposite side. It was full, and radiant, as it had been two nights ago, when it had shed its light upon Clare, as she said "Farewell" in the gardens after Lady Arnot's dance. But it was a lovelier moon up here—soft and clear in its lustre, not fiery and red; and as she and Everett passed swiftly beyond the house into a narrow pathway through thick and twining sweet-smelling woods, the rays of the summer moon fell in a delicate silvery fret-work between the branches, and down upon the deep beds of waving grass and green wood-sorrel and feathery ferns.

They sped fast in silence—panting and laughing as they ran side by side; and soon the thick wood was passed and they came

out upon a winding road, cut along the edge of a bank, steep and precipitous, that rose high above the river. Here the red-stemmed pines grew, with purple heather clustering thick about their roots, and overhanging the ragged edges of the precipice. As they arrived at this point, Clare and Hardy stopped their breathless running and walked with more circumspection, for one tripping footstep in such places might have fatal results. They still passed swiftly along the path, however, for every rough stone and gnarled root in the way was familiar to them both.

Everett walked with the confidence of a man accustomed to climb, and one habitual in Swiss or Scottish mountains, to the giddy pass; and Clare went on rapidly in front of him—with the firm, light tread of a Highlander.

Five minutes more and they had reached their point, and Clare, running on before Hardy, turned quickly off the path through the pine wood, and, springing from stone to stone across the long heather, reached a little quaint white house, octagon-shaped and low-roofed, that stood high upon a promontory of the bank overhanging the deep chasm of the stream. She did not enter here, but passed quickly round it and down below, and there Everett joined her, and they stood knee-deep in the heather—leaning back upon a tall pine stem and gazing in a silent ecstacy upon the moonlit falls. They were soon giddy and intoxicated, and dashed from head to foot with the silver spray; but they gazed still. It was a weird, delirious sensation. Down, a hundred feet beneath them, the water whirled with fearful blackness, in a dark

and unfathomable pool. To the left and to the right the rocks, like grim giants hewn out of the solid stone, towered high; and between their gaping chasms, and down their rugged sides, the falls rushed and hurled and tumbled, in a wild, roaring avalanche of moonlit snow.

The spray rose and blinded them, but through it they could just see the arches of the bridge looming darkly above the water, a little up the stream; and beyond this, the soft outline of the hills rose on each side the rushing river, and formed for miles and miles, the steep, wooded banks of the winding glen. The crest of Stronanachan rose high and loomed darkly beyond the falls, while its lower spur reached far below to their left, where the silver line of the lake appeared, the cool water seeming to bathe its rugged feet.

Clare often said that Everett Hardy had been her teacher in the love of all things beautiful in nature, as in art; but she had never needed him to teach a love for the falls of her old glen, for they had been the central spring of her passionate enthusiasm for nature in all its wild, stormy phases, ever since she could remember a love of anything at all.

"Oh, Everett!" she whispered, after a few minutes, her voice hardly audible in the deafening roar of the cataract and through the strong emotion that choked her words; "fancy seeing it after ten months; at last, at last!"

He nodded his head in sympathetic silence. It was useless to attempt to speak.

His eyes glowed with that strange beauty which artistic passion and intense sensibility gave often to his delicate face.

And then he looked away from her again, took his hat off, threw his head up, and let the spray play upon his tangled hair; then gazed again, drinking deep into the mystic witchery of the moonlit scene.

"We must go," whispered Clare at length; but Hardy shook his head.

The moon rose slowly above them; her rays at that instant had just reached a slender, white-stemmed birch, that grew on a bit of lichen-covered rock on the bank upon the opposite side, and in the mystical light of the silvery beam it glistened with infinite tremulous lights and shadows, and threw strange, quivering reflections over the pool below. It stood out clearly, making of itself a complete effect, separate from the gigantic majesty of the whole—and Everett's eyes were fascinated. Instantly his little sketch-book came out.

"I cannot wait," repeated Clare; "I must go."

"Go then," murmured Hardy. "Do not wait for me. It is heavenly! Do you mind going back alone?"

His art had seized him; all conventional civility had fled—only conventional, however. He knew she understood him, and would not mind at all. Nor did she—Everett Hardy was a very privileged person indeed.

"It will make an exquisite sketch," she said.

"Yes, in sepia—I will get the moonlight effect in afterwards, if I can only get the idea just jotted down."

"Do not stay long, Everett. Cousin Marion will be inconsolable if you do not come home to enjoy your supper."

"No, I will not be ten minutes; but don't you wait."

He spoke almost impatiently, for his attention had quite left her for the moment, as his pencil travelled rapidly to and fro.

"Good-bye, then!" she answered, after waiting a moment, and then she left him and turned up the path.

CHAPTER V.

THE PRINCE IN THE OAK.

IT was just what Clare would have chosen for herself—this moonlight walk, quite alone, through the pine wood and the weeping birch trees, to the old house. She walked slowly, her heart full of pleasure, full of tenderness, full of sweet home love; for this *was* her home, the haven of her baby-days, and of her early girlhood—and with her future, moreover, it had much to do! But this she did not care to think of—her love and her deep enthusiasm for every hill and stream, for

every tree and rock in the whole Glen, still took its colours, not from the future, but from a happy past. As young hearts very often do, she clung tenderly to memories, to all incidents and associations, that belonged to what she liked to call "old days."

These memories were so strong within her,—as she stepped lightly along,—that even Verner Carr was forgotten for the moment, and everybody else in their merry party besides; and so it was, that she almost started as a tall, grey figure approached her in the moonlight, as though for the moment she could not conceive whom it might be. But of course, as she soon realized, it was Percy! No one else could look so huge coming along beneath the dusky trees; no one else could possibly come so slowly over the road, nor approach her in such complete and, apparently, meditative silence

as that in which he was plunged when he drew near.

"Percy, why are you not at your supper? How you startled me! I thought you were a ghost."

"Did I? I did not mean to. I am very sorry, Clare."

"Never mind. I like being startled on a moonlight night like this; it is so intensely mysterious and delicious to see something really a little alarming coming solemnly along. But what are you doing, Percy?"

"I? Why I was going with you to look at the falls."

"But you will never get to them at this rate. Why, I have been there and back again. Everett and I ran nearly the whole way."

"Yes; I know you did."

"Then why did you not run too, Percy, if you wanted to see the falls?"

"There was no good in two fellows running," he answered a little disconsolately; at which Clare laughed merrily and long.

"Oh, Percy, what a base excuse! You know you cannot bear it; you know you would not hurry your footsteps, not to see Niagara itself."

"But I'd hurry anywhere *you* like to ask me to go with you, Clare; only there is always another fellow, so what is the good?"

"Oh, Percy, Percy, how ridiculous you are! Of course there is always everybody, and I am sure there is never any want of me. Come, we will not go to the falls again. You turn and escort me home now, and we shall have a nice little walk in the moonlight together."

"Where is Hardy?"

"Oh, he caught an effect, all of a sudden, and forgot his supper, so I left him sketching there."

"Thank goodness!"

"Well, come along, Percy; we will go home at all events. Is it not delicious? Oh, that smell of the pinewood, and that darling corn-crake over there in the meadow! Has he been croaking, I wonder, without stopping for one single minute, all the summer nights for these hundreds of years—since I used to hear him doing just the same when I was a child? Is it not perfect, Percy?"

"Quite," was the simple monosyllable in which he replied.

"And, oh! look at the moonlight on these great bracken leaves! what huge, splendid branches they have! Oh, Percy, let us look for a King Charlie—this is just the

sort of night we might find him in the oak;" and, quite forgetting her supper and cousin Marion's injunctions, she plunged into the forest of tall ferns that grew along the edges of the path. She seized one and began tugging violently, but it was much too strong for her, and refused to yield.

"Come along!" she exclaimed, stamping with vexation and impatience. "Oh, the hundreds and thousands of times I have tugged and pulled at these horrid things, and they never *will* come out."

"No use putting oneself in a rage," said Percy, in soothing philosophic accents. "Don't, Clare! Here, let me try."

And he bent down and put his hand below hers upon the sinewy bracken stems, and then drew it clean up from the roots with one vigorous, energetic pull.

"Well done, Percy; that is famous!

You *are* strong, you lazy fellow, when you like."

"When *you* like, at all events," he answered in a low murmur, which she was pleased to disregard.

"Now!" she exclaimed, mysteriously. "Now, hush, Percy! stand straight opposite me, there, just in the moonlight. Now, where is my knife?" and she fumbled for her dangerous-looking Thornhill weapon that dangled by her side. "There, now, I cannot cut it! What a tough, hard thing it is!"

"I will do it," said Percy, laconically again. "Now, what do you expect to see?" he added.

He cut the green stem diagonally as he spoke, straight across close by the black, hairy root, and then he held it out to her, laughing. She bent over it, peering close in the moonlight, and he bent also, until their eager

heads were near together, and the bracken stem between them, held close to their eyes. A delicate pattern was traced upon the straight cut face of the fibres: an oak tree with wide, dark branches and thick, gnarled trunk.

"No King Charlie," said Clare. "Oh! how often I have searched for him, Percy, and always, always in vain!"

And she looked up from her bracken into his face, hers quaintly clouded with vexation, like a fanciful, disappointed child, and only then she discovered, that he was not looking upon the fern stem, not peering for a vision of the hiding king, but looking down upon her instead, his heavy blue eyes full of a strange expression she had caught in them before then, indeed often of late. His lip slightly quivered, and his cheek flushed as she looked up at him, but it instantly paled again.

"Come along, Percy!" she said hurriedly. "Let us go in to supper; what nonsense it is cutting bracken, and all that kind of thing!"

"I don't think it is nonsense at all," he said decidedly. "I think it is capital fun. Let us do it again. Perhaps we might find him this time."

"No, no! we must go in now. Do come along!"

"Stay a minute," he persisted. "What is the hurry, Clare? Do you know—or *can* I make you understand, that—I want to speak to you?"

"Oh, but no; please, I *must* go in to supper. You cannot imagine, Percy, how intensely hungry I am," she added, with solemn emphasis.

"You always are hungry or something, Clare, whenever I want to say a word to

you," the young fellow answered, turning to wade back by her side through the tall bracken on to the moonlit path.

"Oh, yes; but you know I hate being spoken to. Please, *please*, Percy, don't."

"Very well," he said, sullenly. "It is all one to you, I suppose; and I am sure it does not matter. Only you know it is not all one to me."

"Yes, yes, Percy, I know. But, oh, we are *such* good friends, are we not? We are so happy, Percy, just exactly as we are, so please do come on. Let us walk very fast, for I am quite sure there will not be a single thing left for us to eat."

"You are frightfully greedy all of a sudden," he remarked.

"Yes, I know; but I am ravenous, I really am."

"Come along, then; it doesn't matter,"

he answered. "Let us go in to supper." And they walked on with rapid steps, and almost silently, to the house.

Clare was really tired after that, and not one bit of supper could she eat in consequence (with all her boasted appetite) when they reached the dining-room, where the rest of the party sat round a sumptuously spread table, enjoying a most comfortable repast. The draughts of strong, intoxicating air she had drunk during the live-long day, in her journeying, had driven all desire for other sustenance away, and over-fatigue and keen excitement began to tell their tale.

She was glad to escape in cousin Marion's charge, when her father and uncle both ordered her to bed, and she was obliged to defer all confidences and revelations until the morrow.

In her own little room, in the snowy nest

which Marion kept ever fresh, bright, and lovely, she was soon asleep; imagination and memory, hopes and anticipations, all mingling in the sweet confusion of dream-land, and taking each to themselves new, fascinating, and fantastic forms.

Clare slept, while late into the night the brothers sat over pipe and cigar together in the laird's workshop, the cosy smoking-room downstairs, and Marion was kept up long in her chamber, waiting until her father passed to his bedroom by her door, and then she came out to him, and they mingled once more their thankfulness and their rejoicing, that their hearts' treasure, their pearl, was once again brought back to them; that their young heiress once more lay asleep within the walls of her future heritage, in the proud "duchus" of the Moray-Erskines, beneath the family roof-tree of the Glen.

CHAPTER VI.

THE ERSKINE WEIRD.

FOR it was true—Clare and not Marion Erskine was the heiress of the Glen.

For generations and generations, long before the days when King Jamie went philandering over the country in quaint disguises, playing comical pranks upon the rugged Scots, the Moray-Erskines (once a younger branch from a southern Scottish family) had held their old Glen in the firm undisputed possession of superior strength; held it free and untrammeled, unentailed,

passing naturally forward through the ages from father to son or daughter, from uncle to nephew or niece, from heir to heir or heiress, as the case might be.

But some generations ago, a certain Erskine had arisen, who, from an evil wish towards the laird or lady who came naturally after him, or from the covetous and cantankerous desire to exhibit to the coming generations the absolute nature of his possessive power, had cast the chains of an entail over the estate, excluding all females of the Moray-Erskines from their right of succession for a certain limited time. The time was long; the old entail stretched far back into the Middle Ages. The number of successions mentioned would have seemed to reach (as doubtless the cantankerous laird had meant it should reach) almost to the world's end.

But still it *had* a limit, and, odd to say, it was in the person and succession of George Erskine, of the Carbineers, in this century of grace eighteen hundred and odd, that that remote limit was at length actually reached. It seemed curiously strange to outsiders,—as an odd stroke of luck falling across the lives of merry Old George and his bonnie daughter; but on the braes of the Glen, to the minds of the people who dwelt there (descendants every one of them of generations of the tenants and followers of the Erskines), there seemed nothing strange in it at all.

It was quite natural, quite expected among them, indeed. From the birthday of the two brothers—now seventy years ago, these and other succeeding events consequent upon these, were regarded as established and inevitable facts. For the mystic

voice, the voice of Highland prophecy, had foretold it among the hills on the Glen side many a day ago. It was the family weird: —"When twa brithers, and they twun-bairns, should be born heirs til the Laird o' the Glen, then wud the auld chains o' entail be broken fornent the dochters o' the Moray-Erskines, and the estate wud pass awa frae the family name."

Sixteen generations they had waited, and then at last the day had come.

An eagle, omen of some stirring event in the family history, had swooped over the ivy tower, as, one summer evening,—these seventy years ago,—Mistress Anna Erskine, the daughter of the Laird of Clan-rachan, and the beloved Leddy o' the Glen, gave birth to Patrick and George, the long looked-for—the children of the prophecy—"the twa brithers, who were twuns."

So, as last heir of that old entail, the estate would come eventually to George, and after him to *his* next successor—whether female or male!

If he outlived his brother, he came into possession of the whole grand inheritance, free and untrammeled by any further will or limit. If he died first the estate went still to *his* heiress and not to Patrick's, to Clare as direct successor to the last heir of entail, and by her, it would then be held (the entail being ended) in free tenure, in full possession, at her own disposal and will. Patrick, the eldest twin, still lay under the power of the old entail, and thus his daughter Marion shared the fate of all former ladies of the house of Erskine since the days of the cantankerous laird—she had no part or interest in the succession whatever! Such was the state of matters

with regard to property in the family at the Glen.

The truth about these points was pretty well known throughout the Highlands, though some details of the curious facts remained to the general mind obscure. But among their Lowland friends people were completely ignorant of the exact bearings of the case, and were only vaguely aware that Clare was an heiress, and a great heiress of lands and towers and moneys in the far North; and that George, if he only lived long enough, would have his purse well filled one of these days; might wipe off old scores, might satisfy the ravening Israelitish wolves who occasionally made his gay life a burden to him; might, in fact, be as rich a man in reality as he had hitherto been in appearance, and—under sufficient pressure—might in the long run positively pay his debts. O

this hope lived many a creditor, and on this chance the wolves of Israel had been forbearing and longsuffering this many a year—for the chance was fair and at least the hope was justifiable.

George's was a tough old life; the laird had been always fragile, and it was a matter of great astonishment indeed to all parties that George had not come into his inheritance long ago.

In matter of fact, with regard to money, things had been very bad with George for innumerable years; indeed, all his life, more or less, it was impossible to say how he had managed.

But he had. Creditors live an incalculable time upon a mere prospect, and George's had been indulgent above the ordinary indulgence of such men. And now it was a "toss up" between them, between his life and

Patrick's, between the inheritance going straight to the Jews of —— Street or to the unconscious Clare.

A "toss up!" For if George outlived the present laird, alas! for the old Glen.

Patrick, let it be said, had helped his brother many and many a time. But with all his apparent frankness of address and manner, George was not open about his money affairs—indeed, quite the contrary. He was, on this subject, wary and secretive to a degree. And so Patrick had no idea how things stood with him, and little suspicion of what fate was to overtake the old house and property, if it ever came to George—no sort of suspicion—and for his peace of mind this was very fortunate.

When the Colonel was young and beautiful, friends had often urged him to marry. He was a second son, he was much admired, and

heiresses were abundant. Why not *ranger* himself and build up his tottering fortunes with the dowry of a wealthy wife? Nothing easier, but, like all things pointed out by sage counsel, as wise and reasonable under the circumstances in which destiny had placed him, George "did not fancy it." Anything ordinary in a wife, were her charms ever so much enhanced by a framework of gold, did not suit his fastidious notions, his vagrant tastes, his erratic fancy. But still, as they all told him to marry, Fate favoured the suggestion quite suddenly, and he obeyed.

He was already of mature age, and Patrick his brother (who more than twenty years ago had espoused and lost a wife) was beginning to despair of any direct succession, and to look upon Joe as a confirmed non-marrying devotee to club and hunter,

yacht and gun, when one fine and breezy morning the yacht appeared quite unexpectedly at the Glen. She lay, as the sun rose, in the rippling bay of the loch, below the drawing-room windows, the new name of *The Rover's Bride* painted upon her bows, and her bunting all flying gaily in the breeze, for behold! she carried proudly an unlooked-for guest on board—a young, fair, strangelike creature, whom, in some out-of-the-way corner, upon his travels, George had discovered, and had made his wife.

He knew little about her save that she was beautiful, and he had married her just because, after long years, he had fallen in love. He had no better reason to give for his performance, and nothing but her beauty to explain his own capture in any way. But here she was, his wife, and likely, before long, to become the mother of his heir.

As such, the old "duchus," with cordial and characteristic geniality, opened wide to receive her, and there for a few months she was cherished and loved, Patrick Erskine all the while rejoicing—although his brother's marriage had been a thoughtless and a foolish deed—rejoicing because he defied prophecy in his bold heart, and hoped with full assurance of hope, that in due course the house of Erskine would have an heir and a son.

A vain hope. She died. For in the weird of the family all their wives die young, and, just as she left them, the news rang through the country that prophecy was accomplished, that the weird had spoken true, and that it was a little daughter, the first heiress of the Glen, who had opened her light, wondering eyes upon the day.

After that George set sail again, and the Glen saw him no more for many restless, wandering years. His light heart had been hard smitten with the soft beauty of that young southern bride of his, and as he always had fled any twinge of painful sensation that threatened him through life, so he avoided now the thrilling memories that had somehow clustered round the woods and the gardens of the old home.

Of his little daughter through these years he rarely thought at all; in fact, almost forgot her—and so she grew up with Marion and uncle Lairdie, in that glorious, wild, old glen.

All her infant and schoolroom days she stayed there—their constant sunshine and their joy. And her life was very beautiful, for the love that encircled her was strong and very tender, and the training that they gave

her between them was brave and vigorous and free.

And so, at sixteen, when at last George came home and found her again, she was a rare young creature, lovely as a wild rose, active at all points as a young mountaineer, with a step like a roe, a glance like a water-flash; with curious, shy, winning ways about her, with healthful habits, strong nerves, and a tender heart—brimful of eagerness and enthusiasm, and (not strange to say, since she was his daughter) full of restless enterprise as well. She bewitched him quickly, and filled his odd, susceptible heart with a new delightful tenderness and pride. And she was his!

It was hard for these two at the old home to part with her after the devotion of so many years, but yet they both approved when George hinted that he would take her

with him when the wintry winds blew coldly again, and when the yacht was rigged to wing once more its southern way.

And Clare's heart was riven in two equal and strongly contentious parts, for she loved intensely her mother Marion, the old laird, the glen, the garden, the hills, the falls, and the glistening loch, to say nothing at all of every man, woman, and yellow-headed child upon the brae-sides, and every rough-coated pony and shaggy colley-dog that belonged to them.

But from the first moment of their tardy acquaintance she had found, too, hidden, all unknown to her, in her heart's deepest depths, a curious tenderness for her vagrant father. She seemed from the very first to understand him—to love all his virtues, and to be blind, quite blind, to his faults. She went with him gladly, though with

many a tear, and from that day she stayed. She was with him always, and new, happy times began, of yearly and unfailing intercourse between the brothers, as, autumn after autumn, George with his friends and retinue and daughter travelled up to the Glen.

CHAPTER VII.

THE TWELFTH.

ON just such a journey we first found them; for the August days had come round once more, the heather was purple on the hill, the air was sweet and fresh, the grouse were ready; and glad and merry they were here—once more in the North!

And now we know them all, as we glance in upon them at breakfast on that particular Twelfth of August, the morning after the journey on which we accompanied them from Euston Square.

It was a lovely morning. The loch was smiling and glistening, and tossing its tiny waves upon the pebbly shore in a lustrous sunshine. The slope of the meadow beneath the windows was emerald green; the purple glowed upon the hills beyond the house; the mist, curling upon the steep braes of Stronanachan, was dry and soft and feathery, and white as snow. The country was rich and ready for the late Highland harvest, from the laird's wide fields of waving barley that lay around the river's mouth, up to the scattered patches of the crofter's corn, that stood out in golden spots among the rocks and heather, high upon the lofty ridges of the hills.

The quaint old dining-room was cool, even in the fierce heat of the August morning, for it lay away from the sunrise, and the great hill that towered close behind

the house, cast a broad, deep shadow upon low windows that opened from the dining-room upon a curious square platform with a grey stone balustrade. It was a bit of the roof, this, that lay lower than all the rest; and it would bear nothing built out upon it—for it was old and was a relic of a former house, that had been burnt down in ancient days of warfare, when pillage and burning of both castle and cottage were very common events. And the laird would not have it demolished, for these queer old houses of the Highlands (unbeauteous and incommodious as they too often are, built at a date when comfort was scorned or unknown among the mountains, and taste as uncultured as money was scarce)—these old houses have, nevertheless, for their sons and daughters a strong, strange witchery of their own; and no member of a Highland

family likes to be the one, to pull, from the rough, grey walls of the "auld hoose" the first tottering stone!

So this bit of antiquated building, with its flat roof, remained—and it was very picturesque in its way.

Of a summer's morning the laird stepped on to it before he touched his breakfast, just to see, perhaps, how the loch looked for a crossing to Knochianan, or to ascertain which way exactly the wind meant to blow; and of hot evenings, he loved to sit out upon the grey slate—his punch tumbler resting upon the stone balustrade beside him, and the huge branches of the old elm trees waving about his head—as he and Marion watched happily together the deep shadows of the twilight creeping duskily over loch and mountain and down the the braes-sides of the glen.

Half the party were out there now, for the laird and the Colonel and Charlie Keith and Marion had finished breakfast nearly an hour ago. They should have made an early start by rights, on the Twelfth of August, for by this hour on other years, many a brace of brown-winged grouse had fallen to the laird's unerring gun.

But sport made concessions this morning to a host's politeness—to the length of yesterday's journey, and to the travellers' fatigue—at least to the fatigue of Sir Edward Hartopp, who had only that moment appeared.

Captain Keith was not a bit tired, as he said, and not a little cross, be it added, at this aggravating delay. It was the Twelfth of August and a glorious morning, the grouse had been awake on the moor-tops since the sun rose, and it was already nearly ten o'clock.

George, too, was chafing slightly as he lit his cigar at the window, but, as usual, he was in high good humour, and, as for the laird, his courtesy, as a host *and* a Highlander, never failed *him*, whatever happened, and he was patient and suave (while Sir Edward gingerly cracked an egg and talked London gossip) as if his guest was his single object and consideration, and as though he little cared at how late an hour he handled his first August gun.

Percy, Clare, and Everett came simultaneously into the room.

"Shame, shame!" cried Charlie Keith excitedly, glad for a legitimate object on whom to vent his spleen. "You lazy cur, Bligh! What an hour for you and Everett to make a first appearance upon the Twelfth!"

He came forward to the window from the

outside, and looked into the room as he spoke.

"Miss Clare, I beg your pardon," he continued. "I did not see you come in."

"You mean that *I* have your august permission to come down when I please, Captain Charlie, is that it? Oh, yes; I know. I may get up or stay in bed all day, for all you care, for the next fortnight. 'Ladies no count,' to *your* thinking, after the Twelfth. But I acknowledge it is too shameful of all of us. Percy, you must make a hasty breakfast; the dog-cart is at the door already. Here, let me give you some tea."

"I am not in any hurry," he answered; "but, thank you, yes; I should like some tea."

"Not in a hurry! By Jove, my dear fellow, aren't you awake yet?" went on

Keith, energetically. "It is the Twelfth, I tell you! have you forgotten? The Twelfth, Percy! The Twelfth of August, man, I say!"

"I know!" said Percy, laconically. "But it isn't much odds, Charlie, as far as I can see."

"Oh, good Heavens! Galvanize him, Miss Erskine, can't you?" exclaimed Charlie in despair. "Wake him up, for goodness' sake! Shake him, Everett, he is next to you! Shout right into his ear, I beg of you, and tell him it is the day we begin to *shoot grouse!* That used to put some life into him, in spite of himself, some time ago. Oh, Percy, I do believe you will be mummified outright in another year!"

"I do not see the fun of a row about it," answered his friend, as he calmly continued his breakfast. "It is all right; it is the

Twelfth, and I am going out on the hills with the rest of you, Charlie, when you all go. What's up, eh? Are you waiting for me?"

"Oh, no!" exclaimed the laird; "not for you, Percy—we are not any of us ready yet; but the cart is at the door, my good friends, and the men and the dogs have been up at the cross-roads for two hours and a half and more, so when you are *all* of you inclined for a start, well, the sooner the better. I am at your service, Sir Edward, whenever it suits you to go."

"My dear sir, a thousand thanks. I am ready, quite ready," exclaimed Sir Edward, "with Miss Erskine's permission if I may rise from table. Varlet waits below with my gun and ulster. I am ready, laird, whenever it suits *you*, sir, on the contrary, to start."

"Good," said the laird. "Then we will get under way."

A few minutes more and they were gathering round the porch door, the men preparing to climb, one by one, into their seats in the high dog-cart; for they had some miles to drive up the glen before they reached the cross-roads at Blairach, where the dogs and gillies awaited them, and where they would strike on foot, up the hill-side, on to the breezy moors.

They were all in the highest spirits, and gay laughter and merry talk echoed in the morning air, as each (armed with his gun, and clad in rough costume of grey or heather-tinted tweed) made his appearance, took farewell of Clare, as she stood in the shadow of the porch door, and raised his cap to Miss Erskine, who watched them from the windows above.

This was the morning routine, but to-day there was a good deal of fuss, and still a good deal of delay.

Pipes had to be filled, guns had to be stowed in, arrangements had to be discussed and settled, and two or three still lagged and were missing; and Ewen, in smart shooting dress, was rushing about with great importance, still making many preparations for the special comfort of "the Colonel."

Percy appeared, looking huge and picturesque enough in a rough tweed of cool texture,—as light-coloured as his yellow hair. He carried his gun under his arm and his cartridge-bag hung across his shoulders, but there was not much eagerness of sport or enterprise in the expression of his face.

The laird still delayed. His grey head,

bending over a cartridge-box with Sir Edward, was visible through the small window that looked out from his workshop by the side of the porch.

Percy and Clare stood waiting by the door for a minute, and then they strolled together across the gravel out to the grass. A long oval-shaped lawn stretched from the house towards the sloping bank that edged the loch on one side, towards the garden upon the other, and to the fringe of dark wood that rose sharply at the end. There was a huge old oak upon the lawn, a venerable monarch among the trees, with great deep fissures in his rugged stem, and with great branches that stretched grandly round him on every side, casting a splendid depth of shadow upon the sunny grass. Under this they stood silent a moment.

Clare carried an open basket in her hand,

filled with bits of broken bread and scraps of toast culled from the breakfast-table; and as she waited she called round her, with a clear whistle, and a coaxing, musical voice, all the pets of the family. The dogs, who seemed innumerable, from her uncle's favourite deerhound to the ragged little terrier that was her own property, though she never transplanted him from the Glen; the tame ravens and the six gulls, that were the special property of old Macroy; a stray pony, often playing truant from the park below;—she fed them all from her basket as they clustered round her, and Percy looked on, puffed clouds of smoke from his big meerschaum, laughed a little at her and at her pets—but said nothing.

"You will have a lovely day, Percy," Clare said, presently, as she tossed her bits of bread far out to the gulls, who swooped

down upon the grass, picked up their morsel and floated heavily away. "You will have a glorious day on the hill."

"I dare say we shall," he said. "But are you not coming?"

"No, I do not think so. Certainly not to-day. I am just a little bit tired, and I want to walk round every corner of the place again before I go *up* the glen; besides, I do not think you, *any* of you, want ladies upon the moor on the Twelfth."

"Why should we not?"

"Oh, because it *is* the Twelfth, and there will be no time to waste over luncheon, especially as you start so late. You will have to shoot hard all day, every one of you, to make anything of a fair bag. Oh, the poor dear, fat, brown grouse! I am so sorry for them."

"I am sure they might live another year for me," he said.

"Percy!" she exclaimed. "What *has* come to you?" And then, remembering something (she did not quite know what) that she had been fancying about him lately, she reddened a little, and turned suddenly away, for she had spoken hastily, and she wished the words unsaid. But the question had been put, however; there was no recalling it. And he answered it as directly as it had been asked.

"I could not conceive myself, a little while ago, what had come over me," he said; "but now—I think I know."

"Oh, Percy, *do* look at that absurd old raven!" she exclaimed quickly in reply. "Look how he stalks up and down over there, like the ghost in Macbeth. He belongs to Macroy, you know, who preserves him carefully, insisting that he has something to do with the fortune of the house.

It is lucky with us up here to tame a raven, and fatal to kill one. Here, you ridiculous old thing, here is a lovely bit of toast for you. Now are you flattered, you old croaker? are you content? He is jealous of all the others, Percy."

"Dare say," said Percy, calmly.

Then a moment's silence ensued.

"What a bore it all is!" he began again. "Why must a fellow go out and shoot grouse, *nolens volens*, the live-long day, just because it happens to be the month of August, and the Twelfth?"

"Oh, Percy, to hear *you* say such ridiculous things! Why, it is all humbug, you know; you would think the world was coming to an end, and your life not worth possessing, if you really could not go grouse-shooting on the Twelfth—unless, indeed, you happened to be shooting something else more exciting elsewhere!"

"I know I'd a deal rather stay at home," he persisted.

"Percy, you are a humbug," she answered, laughing lightly at him, but still turning her reddened cheeks perseveringly away.

She emptied the fragments from her baskets among the terriers and the ravens, and turned to walk towards the house; for the laird's voice was heard calling to them,—and he was about to climb into the dog-cart now.

Everett Hardy stood in the porch, but he had no gun upon his shoulder, and his hands reposed idly in his pockets as he leant back against the lintel of the door.

"Not going, Everett?" said the Colonel, as he passed him.

"No;" said Everett. "I want to get at once to work."

"Pity you do not give yourself the Twelfth, my dear fellow; and such a glorious day as it is, too!"

"Yes, I am sorry we cannot persuade you, Mr. Hardy," echoed the laird, springing nimbly to the seat in front of his brother in the dog-cart. "Sorry we cannot allure you just for to-day from your art."

"Thanks, my dear friends, very many thanks; but I always find I make an idle business of the autumn if I do not go at it sturdily the first day. I left a picture unfinished last year, you know, and I am longing to get to it again. But I will give myself a holiday after a few days."

"Ah, well; we will try and leave you a brace or two," rejoined his host, pleasantly.

"You are a model, my dear fellow," exclaimed Keith. "Good-bye to you; rather you than me. *Au revoir*, Miss Clare!

I wish you were to bring us our luncheon upon the hill."

"Do you?" said Clare, ironically, and with a bright glance at him as he stowed his gun away into the dog-cart, and stood up, high above her head. "Do you? I *think* you will manage to eat it for just to-day without me, eh? Good-bye to all of you. You are very late!"

Percy was up by this time, after one gaze of despair, and of supreme disgust as well, into Everett's face; and Sir Edward was up on the front seat by the laird's side, having been cosily tucked in by his valet, with dust-coat for the heat of the mid-day, and with wrapper and ulster carefully ready for the evening chill. They were off.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE OLD GARDEN.

A FEW hours later, an intense stillness hung over the old house. It was hot, the verdure was heavy, the shadows were soft and deep among the beech woods, the sun sheen upon the water was fervent and bright.

Every window was open.

The dogs lay in dark corners under the porch and in the shadows of the eaves; and out in the garden in one cool, dusky spot, Clare had thrown herself down, upon a soft, green bed in the restful enjoyment of

the summer's warmth—which is never oppressive in that free, mountain air—and of the drowsy shade which a towering pine and drooping ash tree cast above her head.

Miss Erskine sat by her on a grey, moss-grown stone, imbedded in periwinkles, that had been brought there somehow in the ages, and was a favourite seat with them all, in this shady corner of the grounds.

The garden was old-fashioned, like everything else in the place. It was rich in verdure; for it was well sheltered, and it was brilliant just now with roses and hardy pelargoniums and other summer flowers.

Its gnarled old trees, and its many bushes, were laden with a wealth of ruddy cherries, with ripe, fat, bursting gooseberries, and with delicious jet-black "geans;" and the garden altogether, where it lay behind

the house, with its rich and tangled confusion, dusky shade, brilliant flowers, and ripe summer fruit, was a pleasant place to rest in, through the heat of the August day, or in the cool of the evening.

And under the pine tree, on the grey stone, amid the periwinkles, was Miss Erskine's favourite drawing-room for the summer months.

Marion Erskine was one who, notwithstanding the intensity of the womanhood of her deep nature, had lived her life amidst many interests, and with many occupations that had given her mind in some sense a certain masculine tone. She was far from masculine in heart, in manner, or in opinions. But in the habit of her thought, there was a vigour, and a clearness that went with unfeminine directness of purpose to its point; and there was besides this,

in her countenance, a quiet strength, that carried a very pleasant effect of repose (curiously infectious to those who spoke with her), and that conveyed an idea of complete acquiescence and satisfaction with the destiny of her own existence.

In a tossing and restless world it *was* something, to be with one, who so faced her life—self-contained, and composed, with a full-hearted contentment that was rare to see.

She had a truly womanly spirit, but few feminine occupations. She was seldom seen passing idle moments in light feminine works. She had her household certainly, and her place as a daughter and a hostess, both of which were very gracefully filled. But the large concerns of an extensive property which she passionately loved, and the earnest responsibilities of a vast and

very scattered tenantry, provided ceaseless occupation for her father, all of which were shared equally by her; and as years gathered quickly upon the old laird, she did more and more for him, and all the chief cares of his estate and people really rested now upon her shoulders, and were managed by her clear, strong mind. It was only a stewardship, as she knew, for this bright girl at her feet; but as a stewardship she held it faithfully and well.

Perhaps the happiest moments of Marion's life were just such as this one, when she listened and Clare spoke—when, amid the soft shades and tender beauties of the old home garden, she had the girl safe with her again, the bright heart still all unspoilt, speckless and transparent as ever, before her searching and loving gaze, and the girlish voice babbling out its eager stories,

just as in her childish days, with an open confidence that spoke the depth of their understanding, the intensity of their sympathy, and the assurance of their mutual love. If she loved anything more than the hill and glades of her old Glen, it was Clare, and the only concern which held a higher place in her heart than her thought for the place and the people, was this fair young heiress of it all.

"I want you just—to see him," Clare was saying dreamily, as she lay among the periwinkles, and pillowed her brown head upon the leafy sprays. "I want you just to know him, cousin Marion, and to tell me what you think."

"I suppose I shall know him, dear, if he comes in a fortnight. But why he more than all the others, Clare?"

"Oh, I do not know; there is not any

real reason. I cannot tell *why* I want you so much to see him, only—yes, to me he does seem different from all the rest."

"Better? handsomer? what? or is it only my enthusiastic Clare—who always sees perfection in her friends that no one else can discover in them—who has let her fancy be caught?—ah! how often? by just one little thing that is attractive in a character, and shuts her eyes steadily to everything else."

"If I like a person I cannot see anything in them but just that I like them," said Clare.

"And so you see your liking reflected for the time being, and it forms a veil between your judgment and their real selves. Ah! Clare, until the scales fall—then? I have seen you *désillusionné* once or twice already, my child."

"I know, but I am not *illusionné* now, Marion. I do not think I am; besides, perhaps it did not matter, for I do not see why I am fancying all this time that he may care a little for me. I do not know why I fancy it, and I would not talk of it, not for anything, to any one in the world, cousin Marion, but you. But somehow there he is, framed out in my thoughts, as it were, quite separate from every one of them, although we have been together, all of us, the whole summer through."

"And my favourite, poor Mr. Bligh, Clare? Ah! after all—is there no golden frame in your mind for him?"

"Percy?—poor, dear, old Percy! of course, he has got his own place. Why, they are all so wonderfully kind to me, every one of them, you see; and as for Percy, he has been so good to me, I cannot say how good, but

anything further——Oh, cousin Marion, I never thought of loving him!"

"Loving!" whispered Marion. "And has it come to it that you think of loving that other, Clare?"

"Verner Carr? Oh, I do not know—you must see him. I cannot tell you if it is loving, or why should I think that he loves me? Why should I? Why should I? How horrid I am! But—I do not know what it is—a year ago I never thought of anything of this—a year ago, I was so happy, with father, and Percy, and Everett, or any of the rest, and now—I do not know, but it all seems in the past, that thoughtless life, the happy days in the yacht, and the merry times in London, and the delicious autumns when we all came up here—and then the old, old years, too, behind all that again, when I lived at home with uncle Lairdie and you.

It is all in the past, going far away from me, every bit of it, and something else—a real sort of life, earnest, strong things—the future, seems to have come over me instead. Cousin Marion, I think my young days have gone from me quite suddenly,—and that I have to live the life of a woman, and feel real things, and have real things to do before long."

"Transition times come over all of us at intervals, my Clare, and life reveals itself, as we have each to live it, stretching into the future, unrolling before us like a loosened scroll; and yours is an appointed life and destiny, that contains many duties, which will prove as you go onward very earnest and real indeed."

"I do not see duties yet, though, Marion. I only feel that I have been floating like a butterfly upon the summer air, and that

something has opened up within my heart which gives it all a new colour to me. It seems sometimes to blend with everything, and even to intensify the very sunshine in which I have lived; sometimes it makes life — just my everyday life — infinitely more delicious, and then suddenly it makes it all mysterious, as if something unknown were going to come to me, something real and very deep and grave. I do not understand about it, for I am not a sentimental person, you know, Marion, not a girl who ever thought much, or indeed anything of these kind of things; only it has come to me just somehow this season, and at all events I was resolved of one thing, that I would tell all about it to you."

"I am glad," answered Marion, after a moment's pause. "I am glad that he is coming here; I shall like to make acquaintance, dear, with Major Verner Carr."

It was late now in the summer's day. It was cool as the sun sank behind the mountains, and the air blew sweetly down the glen.

And after that long, delicious rest among the periwinkles, Clare felt that her revived energies prompted an evening walk.

Dinner would be a late repast that night; there was no chance of the sportsmen coming down from the moor-tops while the daylight enabled them to aim. So tea at five o'clock, was an important affair in the month of August at the Glen, and Miss Erskine had her pretty table spread under the great oak upon the lawn.

Clare left her there, when they had drunk their tea together, and set forth by herself, just as the soft shadows were deepening round them, and the air was cool. They had been wandering about, instead of sitting idly in the garden, since their

luncheon hour — wandering under the cherry trees, among the flowers and strawberry beds, and Clare had filled a basket with the huge ripe cherry, and as she could not eat them (for she had already gone marauding like a black-bird, from tree to tree and from bush to bush), she bethought her now of Everett Hardy,— sitting, poor fellow, through the dry, hot day on the topmost peak of Craigianan, where he was finishing his grand view of the glen. She set off, quite delighted with the idea as it struck her, to carry the ripe, refreshing cherries to him.

She was often interrupted in her walk; for all the day long, since the early morning, when she had first appeared on the sunny lawn, numberless old favourite retainers and well-known ancient hill-side friends had been watching for her, looking shyly

round the big trees, and peeping from behind the gate-posts, just to catch a glimpse of their "bonnie young leddy" once more. She was much beloved there, although not yet "hersel'"—not *the* leddy —not Miss Erskine, o' the Glen; but still their bright star o' the future, "Miss Clary"—"the wee, braw, bonnie leddy"—as she had been among them since her infant days.

"Eh, Donall!"—"How are ye, Huistan?" —"There ye are, Mistress Mactavish, ye are looking well!—Here I am, back again, ye see,—back at the Glen again—the dear old Glen—it looks lovelier than ever, too!" These and many such greetings she had to pause to exchange at nearly every corner of the winding woody pathway as she wandered up the hill; many a hearty blessing greeting her in

answer, as the blue bonnets were doffed, and old and young murmured their welcome from every cottage door. "Och, Meathalh, blessing upon her bonnie heed! Och, the bonny bairnie that was in it; and whatna' a braw leddy we hae noo. Och, it's yersel' that's welcome, Meathalh, to y'r ain. Och, may the Lord be gude till her, and gie His boontifu' blessing on her goulden heed! Och, the bonnie birdie! Ochone! Ochone!"

Clare loved in her heart's inmost depths their homely greetings, and her cheek glowed and her eyes sparkled with pleasure as she passed from "bothie to bothie" along the rugged street of the "little toon," giving her slim hand again and again into the eager, fervent clasp of many a rough palm, and bending her head with sweet instincts of reverence, as, in the warm, passionate language of her native moun-

tains, blessings and earnest wishes for her well-being were poured from their rugged lips. "May the Lord be gude till ye, my braw, bonnie queen!" The echo followed her sweetly as she left them at length, and turned from the little "toon street" into the thick birch wood, and wound her way upwards on the narrow stony pathway of Craigianan Brae.

CHAPTER IX.

A MOUNTAIN STUDIO.

AN artist's day, on the pinnacle of a Highland hill, in the month of August, is a very celestial and ideal thing. Quiet and solitary, save for the wild birds that swoop round him, and the brown deer, which may show its nose and antlers over a distant crag, sniff the air and scent a danger, and then bound swiftly away.

Drinking deep into the passionate joy of his glorious art, as his steady gaze wanders over the heavenly prospect, he weaves

its glowing tints and shadows and smiling lights into a new fair creation of his own; living the intense inner life, that heeds not the passing of time, nor cares if the hands be weary and the spirit tired, provided art is triumphant and its mission worthily achieved: heeding nothing—vulgar wants and minor care, and love, and vanity, and common worldliness, and the applause of men, all forgotten, all plunged in the Lethe streams of these mystic and ineffable joys.

Such were the moments which Fate brought in her uncertain hand, as her gifts of this life, to Everett Hardy. Many another thing men seek and care for, she had denied; but this she gave him—to be successful and intensely happy in his art. And he was so true an artist, in all the delicacy and sensibility and great refine-

ment which the true artistic temperament of his class supplied, that, with his art, or as, indeed, a part of it, he had received a certain attractive power over other and very different kinds of men.

His nature was ductile and sympathetic in conversation with those who suited him, and when happy in their society he could expand into light and versatile frames in which he was a singularly winning companion.

"The pleasantest fellow out," many men called Everett Hardy, as they sought his society again and again.

He had no money and no aristocratic connections to push him into prominence and fashion; but he was *bien répandu* notwithstanding, and constantly sought after for the sake of his own charming and artistic self.

If Fate had given him few gifts in this world, of their kind, she had given them good. He had his art and he had his friends, and he was generally a happy man, for he was devoted to both of them.

Put him into a congenial and a social atmosphere, however much it might apparently differ from his own, and he asked nothing more; leave him in solitude, and he was still contented. Nothing ever dismayed him, but society with which he failed to sympathize.

There were certain classes of people, who confessed they "could not see anything in the little painter." There were certain houses in London, where the cooks were good and the dinner splendid, where nothing earthly would have induced him to go; but have him at a *parti carré*, however simple the repast, or at a little circlet dinner, numbering some-

thing over the Graces, but well short of the Muses; let him speak in his own quaint way, with no boisterous talker to swagger him instantly down, and you will find somehow you will have a pleasant dinner, and be quite certain to ask Everett Hardy again.

He must have caught these fantastic little thoughts of his, which he brought out so gracefully just now and then, high up near that blue horizon, in the solitude where he spent so many dreamy days. He must have acquired that quiet, humorous indifference with which he regarded the common points of men's lower ambitions, by gazing so long and often upon higher and more glorious things. And from the day when Fate, among her other strange and curiously entangled gifts, brought him the friendship of Clare Erskine, he had

formed as strong an influence in the elements of her life, as she did in his.

When she arrived this evening, her felt hat with its wild bird's plume appearing above the grey rock quite suddenly, just in front of him, he had been thinking of her; realizing, as he washed out his brush, and as he contemplated his picture with a low, dreamy whistle, that—this was hers, her grand inheritance, which he had been transmitting in glowing colours to his lifeless canvas; and he was thinking of days, when the picture would hang before him, between now and next year's Academy, in his London studio, while Clare was perhaps far away.

Suddenly Clare appeared before him, flushed by her hasty scramble up the steep hill-side, laughing brightly, pleased at having found him, and at her own achievement in breasting so rapidly the

rocky path; with the sunset in her eyes, a glow upon her soft cheek, and with the basket of glossy cherries in her hand.

"Ah! here you are! Poor Everett, what a long day's work you have had!"

"Have I? Has it been long?" he answered. "It has not seemed so to me."

"I suppose not, absorbed as you always are in your entrancing work. And now I am disturbing you, and you are wishing me at the bottom of the hill!"

"No, not at all. I have just finished; the shadows are too deep in the hollows now. I am delighted to see you. I was just putting my things away."

"But stop, do; let me look first. Oh, Everett, how lovely!"

And so it was. It was a grand picture. He had been toiling over it many long days of the previous autumn, and now it was nearly

complete. It was a fine subject: the far swoop of the winding glen, the pools and cataracts of the river appearing dark in shadow or bright in sunlight at different points; the towering summits of the distant corries and the soft blue outlines of the nearer hills; the patches of corn and stretches of heather; the glades of birch and fern, the tufts of oak, and the deep, clustering shades of the beech woods—all combining and all blending in one harmonious whole—stretched away before them with a grand panoramic effect; and all were transferred in tints and shadows of glowing purple and russet brown, and in the soft, dusky greens of the coming autumn, on to Everett's canvas. It was one of the finest things he had ever done, and Clare's eyes sparkled as she gazed upon it.

"Oh, Everett, it is glorious to be a painter!"

"Sometimes. Yes, when you seem to get along pretty well."

"And this is well. Surely, you must think so yourself?"

"It is pretty good," he answered. "I really think it is. I used to test it last winter, as it hung unfinished in my studio. And—yes, I used to feel quite sometimes as if I were here again."

"I am sure you must. One can hear the river under those alders there, and that bit of the falls at Blair—how they seem to rush and tumble over the rocks! It is perfect, Everett."

"I am glad you like it," he said.

"But how tired you must be!" she went on. "See, I have brought you some cherries. Will they not refresh you, after your long, hot day?"

"How good of you!" he said, lightly.

"But what is the saying?—'Fruit, gold in the morning,' and something else, I forget what, 'after the sun has set.'"

"Oh, 'silver in the mid-day, and lead at night.' But the sun has not set yet, Everett; and it will be ages before we have our dinner. So, eat them up, do, valiantly, in defiance of all consequences; for I shall be dreadfully distressed if you do not care for them, after my carrying them so far, and specially for you."

"The sun has not set, certainly, but it is busy doing so," he answered, laughing. "Well, let us sit down and watch him; and we may at least eat cherries till he has gone out of sight." And he took the basket from her hand, and seated himself upon a bit of rock, with his feet buried deep in tufts of clustering heather.

A quaint little figure, in his rough tweed

jacket, all stained with paint and smudged with Indian ink and Chinese white, and a little ragged, moreover, at the wrists and elbows—an odd figure, but picturesque, as the deep sunlight, coming in level rays from where it was setting quickly, in strong glowing colours over the hills just in front of them, across the river and the glen, fell straight upon his face, deepened its dark olive tone, shone in his keen, far-seeing eyes, and carved out his delicate, handsome features, with his small moustache and short, pointed beard.

"Oh, Everett," Clare suddenly exclaimed, "I wish some one were here who could paint *you!* What a funny characteristic picture you would make, just here, with all your surroundings; in your studio jacket, with that most becoming *beret* on your head, and with your easel set up here beside

you, with this big canvas upon it, and the grey stones, and the heather, and then your tent-cloth bothie there, standing just behind!"

"I must have the red calf brought in then, who has been my companion all the afternoon, a most sociable young party."

"Yes, certainly, and the patch of field there, and that queer old cottage, and the rough pony poking his nose over the tumbling dyke. Oh, Everett, how delicious it is to see it all again!" she continued, as she sat down by him on the mossy rock, and sighed a quick sigh of intense enjoyment, as she feasted her gaze on the lovely view.

"And how delicious are these black cherries!" he answered.

"Are they not? Cousin Marion and I have been luxuriating in fruit and roses, and idleness and gossip, the live-long day;

and then what a walk I have had up here! Is it not perfect, Everett? To smell, to look, to listen—I don't know *which* is most delicious in the Highlands on an August day."

"Or, in combination of all these, to feel!"

"Yes, to feel comes besides and along with all—to feel the air blow fresher and fresher, and soft as rose leaves, as one mounts up here, and to feel the sense that it is Scotland again, the dear old Glen once more! I never realize how home-sick I have been all the many months till I find myself coming back again. I never realized it, indeed, at all for the first year; everything else was so bewitching and new. But now, I do seem to love this old place more and more utterly every year I live. I am a regular Highlander, Everett, I do think; and I dare say, after our wanderings, father

and I will come back and settle ourselves down here permanently, one of these days, after all. Look at that little white house there below the birch wood; it is called Rowan Brae. I always fancy we will some day fix ourselves there. It would be so near cousin Marion and my uncle, you know."

"And you would anchor *Le Plaisir*, like an old used-up boat, down there in the bay, I suppose, and change the French name for a Gaelic one, and pension off Monsieur Leplat and Captain Sharpe and Mademoiselle Fanlie. How would she like a Highland life all the year round, I wonder? About as well as her mistress, I dare say. I cannot say I see any signs of such a meritorious coming to anchor for either you or *Le Plaisir* just yet, Miss Éclair."

"I do not know, I am sure; but this kind

of thing cannot go on always, can it, Everett? One cannot go fluttering about, drinking a drop of honey from every kind of flower, in every sort of garden, far and near—and then just floating away to the next one—father and *Le Plaisir* and me. It will come to some sort of end one of these days."

"To a natural consummation, as far as you are concerned, Mademoiselle, I have no doubt."

"No, I do not mean that," she answered, hastily. "I mean one of these days one must settle down at home, you know, and begin to be of use."

"You are of more use than most people that I know of now," said Everett. "We will have to do without you, sooner or later, one of these days, in our festive circle; but I do not know what sort of thing it will be

without you, on the yacht or in Curzon Street then. Do not be in a hurry about it, Éclair."

He spoke significantly, but he did not look at her as he uttered the last sentence.

"What do you mean, Everett?" Clare answered, after the pause of an instant. She spoke in a low tone, but steadily. The question was evidently intended and direct.

"Well, you see, Éclair," he continued, suddenly turning his eyes with a gentle, eager expression full upon her face. "I have known you a long time now, have I not?—since you were little more than a slip of a schoolgirl, when you first came afloat with us, the winter we went to Sicily, five years ago, and we have been good friends, Éclair, have we not?"

"I should think, indeed, we have," she answered, in a decided tone. "I owe more

to you than to most people, Everett. I wonder, what I would have brought away in my mind from all the queer places we have been to, if I had not had *you* all the while to put something into it—some idea of the meaning and beauty of it all. You have been a good friend to me, Everett."

"May I take a friend's privilege?"

"To scold me? Yes, if I deserve it."

"No, not to scold; but—shall I say it, eh?—to warn!" he said, very low, almost in a whisper.

"Oh, Everett! I wish I had had some suspicion of all this while I was gathering cherries in the garden. I would have carried them in, every one of them, to Mrs. Fraser, for dessert!"

"And not brought them to me? Well, I dare say it is a poor return to begin to worry you, and I will not. There, I have done;

only—the old Glen, you are very fond of it, you know, and it will be yours some day to bestow, and,—well, I have done, as I said, Éclair, only——" He again hesitated.

"Only you have something horrid to say, Everett; and you may as well say it. I would as soon hear it as not, my friend, now. Out with it! I promise not to go off like a Carnival rocket, if it is not very, very bad."

"Well, it is not much, after all, Éclair; only, you know, I see more than most fellows. I am generally 'on the quiet,' you know, when we are 'under way' together or touring round, and I see something, well, a rock upon the offing over there, that our dainty yacht, our sunny, white-winged *Plaisir*, may be going to run her graceful bows against, and I do not like it, Éclair; that is all."

"And why not like it, Everett?"

"Like *Le Plaisir* to shiver her planks and spring a fatal leak, against a rock, a hidden rock, too, I dare say, or a hidden one to her, at all events, as I see it must be? I cannot like it, Éclair."

"So you take the helm, trusty Everett?"

"No, not the helm; far from it. What right have I, Éclair? I am not the captain, still less the *patron* of the yacht, but only a trusty friend, with a sharp look-out on the horizon, and a quick eye for breakers, and a horror of Mother Carey's chickens, as they flutter and swoop round the mast-head. For *Le Plaisir* is a fair little ship to me, and I have watched her dancing on the summer waves of a sun-lit sea this many a day, with a strange pleasure, and if she founders, well, it shall not be without a warning shout from *me*."

"You are a terrible fellow for a friend, Everett, certainly. You do keep those quick, little eyes so wide open, and it is dreadful how they go dancing about; nobody has seen anything, Everett."

"No; that dear old stupid, dunderheaded owl, Percy, he even has seen nothing, though the hole in the brick wall to my thinking, has been big enough. But he has got his eyes fixed—like an old ass as he is—so firmly in one wrong direction, that he has never thought of turning them in any other, so he is 'blinded by his own folly,' as the words of wisdom say."

"Percy—dear old fellow! he is too silly. But, Everett, I do not want to speak about it—you know there is nothing in it; but just in one sentence tell me—I do not mind asking *you*, you know—what is the draw back? Why, supposing it was so, which ...hy should it not be?"

"If it *is*, it is too late," said Everett. "But if you assure me in all truth that it is *not*, Clare, then I will tell you my reason. I will utter my warning in a few well-chosen words."

"It *is* not, it *is* not, whatever it may be!" repeated Clare, with strong emphasis, continuing to express her earnest meaning thus in curious and ambiguous terms.

"Then if it is not, never—let—it—be. That is my whole warning, Éclair. I need not say more."

"Yes, but why?"

"Why? In a word, I can easily tell you why. Do you wish me to do so? Well, because he is the most selfish, cold-hearted fellow out,—and, you may believe it, it is an unprejudiced and well-formed opinion, based upon most substantial grounds. He has not a high thought, nor a fine taste, nor

a disinterested impulse in his whole com-
position. Have nothing to say to him,
Éclair. He is not at all the kind of
fellow for you."

"I cannot conceive," said Clare, quietly,
not in the least angry, only wonderingly, as
if that were the only slight effect that had
been produced by his words; "I cannot
conceive why every one of you is always
and incessantly abusing Major Verner Carr."

"The sort of fellow men don't like, eh?
Well, I do not think you can say a muc
worse thing of a man."

"When people abuse a friend of min
continued Clare, demurely, "I feel
clined to stick to him more faithfully t
ever."

"Do you? Then be quite sure," E
"that I will never abus

He rose as he spoke and turned to his picture, and prepared to lift it from the easel and carry it into the little tent.

Éclair sat still a few minutes where he had left her.

She looked with an uncertain dreamy gaze over the shadowy hills from which the summer lights were fading fast away. Her eyes were suffused and softened, the expression quickly changing again and again, as she sat these few minutes alone; and then, at last, a quiet look of resolution came into them, and all doubts and all misgivings passed away; their glow brightened, and sweet, scintillating lights of reviving memories and of pleasant, unuttered thoughts flashed and quivered in their transparent depth, until suddenly she looked down—the long, dark lashes lay softly on her cheek for a moment, and two large, glistening tears

fell like summer rain-drops upon her folded hands. Then she roused herself, rose up, and followed Everett into his painter's tent.

It was such a queer little place, a small low canvas room, which he could use as a travelling studio, up here on the hill-tops, when driven inwards by a sudden summer gust of mountain storm.

He had used it for many a year, as a studio by day and bedroom by night, in many a strange out-of-the-way corner of the artist's world. It was waterproof and sunproof, and it rolled up to the size of a large umbrella. It was painted and scribbled all over within, its canvas hidden by hasty sketches of many lands and scenes, and interlaced by bits of queer poetic writings, both complimentary and derisive, all dedicated to, and descriptive of, the

artist and his work. They were productions of the brotherhood of the pen and paint-pots, of whom many members were familiar visitors to the travelling studio abroad and at home. Convenient shelves were slung upon the sides and cross-beams, covered with pots, bottles, brushes, palettes, all already unpacked and arranged by Everett for his summer's work—for he meant to repeat his large picture of the glen this year, under different atmospheric effects.

He was placing his beautiful and beloved child of the time-being carefully upon a tall easel for the night, when the sweet, clear voice spoke close behind him.

"Everett, thank you!" Clare was saying. "I have not thanked you yet, and I want to do so. I know what a kind and real friend you are to me."

He continued to place his picture, and

bent over it a moment before he answered. Then he turned and raised his bright, gentle eyes to the girl's face.

"And you are very good," he said, in a quiet voice. "Very good, to take my crabbed old bachelor's interference so well."

"But I wish you did not, Everett," she continued; "I wish you did not think it all. Take it back, will you not? take it all back — every unkind word you have said of him?"

"Words that I have said of Verner Carr? Not one of them," he answered, decidedly; and Clare turned away from him for a moment with an impatient gesture and glance.

"Then," she continued, softened again at his earnestness and eager care for her, "wish me well, Everett, whatever happens!

My dear old friend—my master in many helpful ways—wish me well! There is no one, except perhaps cousin Marion, whom I trust and confide in as I do in you. There is no one in the least like you, Everett. You must wish me well."

He had taken her two hands before she had finished the sentence, and he was gazing into her face when she ended, as they stood together in the queer little low-roofed tent. And his eyes glistened and softened, as they rested upon her, with a tender and very lovely expression in them, just such as they always gained when he stood gazing, a whole hour through, upon a Greuze in the Louvre, or a Raphael in the Pitti Palace at Florence. All such things of fair, unconscious beauty affected him always thus—and so the new light of a dawning future quivering upon

Clare's young face affected him with strong, sweet emotion. He raised her two hands to his lips presently and dropped a light, soft kiss on each.

"Wish you well!" he murmured. "Ah! if it *were* only well, Éclair! My sweet 'Indian Summer'—flower of my autumn garden—I have spoken, and risked your friendship in speaking. I have uttered words of warning, hazarding everything, and may not that prove to you that I wish you well?"

"And him?"

"Let us not speak of him," he answered, turning to throw a light covering over the picture on the slanting stand. "Come, we must go down the hills. I have risked enough mischief to one of the few sweet things of friendship which Fate has given to my vagrant artist life. Come, let us go

down now before I injure my own interest further in my thought for yours."

They passed out of the little tent then, and turned down the hill together.

CHAPTER X.

JEALOUSY.

LET it not be supposed now, as these two threaded their way among the rocks and heather, down through the birch woods on to the level road; as the evening gathered in deep shadows around them, and the night fell softly—for it was late, and the sun had long sunk away;—let it not be supposed that Everett Hardy had ever, at any time, cherished any illusions in his own heart with regard to Clare. He called her his "Indian Summer," for he was a young man

no longer, and had been well past his prime when she had first come among them as his companion, his friend, his pupil, and admiring disciple in all things pertaining to art. She had been a wonderful, bright thing in life just then to him, and he felt it would not be for long; so he called her his "Indian Summer"—a glorious bit of sunlight flashed for a little upon his path. But they had maintained their friendship undisturbed and untarnished by anything else. And it was a deep friendship, because many subjects approached between them were soul-stirring and deep; yet it was a frank, open, transparent friendship, and all untroubled by any confusion with other phases of feeling on either side.

Clare had been a child in these things until six months ago, when Verner Carr's dark, eager eyes had first encountered hers;

and Everett was one of those rare men, perhaps despised in some sort by many other men, whose art was his real god and mistress, the absolute sovereign of his life, and one by whom a woman, even young and fair, and wonderfully witching, too, could be actually loved as a dear, sweet friend, living near to his heart, enshrined in tender sentiments, that twined round her image with a close fidelity that made her his constant thought.

And yet he was not "in love" with her, in the common acceptance of the term "in love." He could think of her, and for her—with regard to her future, her destiny, her affections—even as they had no respect to any sentiment for him. Therefore, he was, of course, not "in love," and on his own account suffered no agonizing pangs. His path had been long cut out for him, and he

followed its curious windings with contented interest and with much deep joy in many beautiful and inspiring things.

And in the destiny of his wandering life, amid its art and its fancies and its friendships, scattered far and wide, such a settled and steady part to play as the husband of Clare Erskine, and the laird, through her inheritance, of a Highland glen, could never possibly be his. "*Ce n'était pas dans le rôle de sa vie*," as he would have said, contentedly, if anybody, noticing their close confidence and attachment, had suggested such an idea to him.

So they could walk through the deep shadows of the birch woods together, as the evening gathered darkly around them, and the soft moss on which their feet fell began to glisten with cool night dews, and they could walk side by side in the

silence of an assured friendship, in the quiet intercourse of their mutual confidence, and speak of deep things, and fair things, of nature and beauty and art; and yet float safely past these fatal rocks of personal sentiment and disturbing passion round which the smooth streams of such sweet friendships too often eddy into cataracts and storms.

Out upon the white road they came suddenly, through an opening in the rough stone wall, and there they paused a moment.

It was late and almost quite dark now, especially here upon the level road, where the wood clustered thick upon the river-bank and along the dyke-side, and hung low in green, feathering festoons above their heads. It was intensely still, save for the rushing waters, the distant cries of

the wild birds, and the soft, summer winds whispering among the leaves—and for one other sound still far away, that reached them as they paused and listened. It was the steady fall, upon the dry, hard road, of horses' hoofs—coming quickly down the glen.

"Ah, here they are!" said Clare. "Not so late after all, to-night. I believe we shall be at dinner before ten."

"We have just hit them off," said Everett, and they waited and leant back upon the low wall.

A few minutes, and they appeared in sight; the *fourgon* with the sportsmen, and the game-cart, heavily laden, and crammed with keepers and servants, came one after the other trotting rapidly down the glen.

They had had a glorious day, the finest

scent upon the high moors, and grouse as abundant as masculine heart could wish. And they were in great good humour, and very hungry for their late dinner. Nevertheless, with eager alacrity the laird pulled up his horses when, in the shade of the birch trees against the broken wall, he saw in the dusky twilight the figures of Everett and Clare.

"Ah! there you are; come to meet us; that is capital! Well done!"

"Had a good day, uncle Lairdie?"

"Not at all bad, I hope," said her uncle, as he loosened out his reins, to give his panting horses a minute's rest.

"Not bad! it was magnificent!" exclaimed Sir Edward Hartopp. "My dear laird, my dear young lady, I do not think that even at his Grace the Duke of Strathallandale's, when they turned out every bird on the

hill-side for the benefit of H.R.H.—I do not think, and I give you my word for it, I have ever seen more magnificent sport."

"First class!" exclaimed Charlie Keith, nodding with intense personal satisfaction, as he removed his cigar. "First class, Miss Clare, and no mistake about it. Hardy, you were an ass not to come!"

"I dare say," said Everett; "but, thank you, I have been very happy in my own way."

"Humph!" said Percy, laconically, from the back seat of the dog-cart; and what he exactly meant by the ejaculation, nobody stopped to inquire.

Old George was shouting lustily his own description of the successful sport, and then the laird was gathering in his rein again and saying, "Will you come up,

Clare? we will make plenty of room for both you and Mr. Hardy between us, somehow. Will you come up, and we will drive you home?"

"No, thanks; I am not a bit tired. And it is not worth while; it is such a little way to walk. I shall be there and ready for dinner long before one of you. So you can go on."

"Very well, as you please; then we are off again. Everybody ready, eh? Halloa, Mr. Bligh! what are *you* about?" and the laird drew in his rein again sharply, just as he had been encouraging his eager horses to proceed.

There was a movement behind.

"I am getting down," shouted Percy, who was on the wheel already, just preparing to spring.

"What! going to walk home with Clare

and Hardy? All right, only look sharp about it, my good friend; this mare won't stand."

Down came Percy with a clear bound, right on the ferny edging of the ditch, just in front of Clare.

"The very earth shook, you elephant!" exclaimed Keith, with a cheery laugh, and on went the *fourgon* spinning rapidly out of sight, while the three were left standing together in the deepening twilight, by the green ditch-side.

Percy looked at Clare and Everett, from one to the other alternately, and he stood silent for an instant, a dark, angry expression, very rare to him, clouding his fair, *débonnaire* face.

"Well, Percy?" said Clare, brightly.

"I *would* come down," he replied, hoarsely, after a moment's pause. "I

could not help it, for the life of me, when I saw you two standing here. I know you do not want me. I know you are swearing at me between your teeth, Hardy, and I know *you* are wishing me at the Antipodes, Éclair. But, by Jove, I could *not* help it!"

"And why should you?" said Clare. "We are delighted to see you, Percy. What nonsense you do talk!"

"Nonsense, is it? *I* do not think so, at all events."

"Greek, then!" said Clare, laughing. "You are cross, Percy, and you had certainly much better have stayed in the dog-cart, if you are going to make yourself unpleasant here. But come along; we must walk quickly, for it is past the latest rational dinner hour, and we shall not have five minutes to dress."

Everett began a low, meditative whistle,

and after one rapid gaze of keen scrutiny into Percy's miserable and angry face, he turned and walked quickly homewards, as Clare had begged him, by her side.

She had set out walking very quickly too, and Percy tossed his cigar away, and plunged his hands into the pockets of his long coat, and came after them. He took the place on Clare's other side, and he, too, trudged along in gloomy silence.

And so they hurried down the glen, under the drooping birch trees, past a cluster of cottages, where glowing lights were appearing in the low, small windows one by one. On they went with little more conversation of any kind, until they rounded the corner by the garden and came in sight of the house.

"Dinner in five minutes!" exclaimed Clare, as she reached the porch door,

crossed the threshold, and disappeared towards her own room as she spoke.

"Not quite so quick as that, I dare say," said Everett, quietly. "Look here, Percy, there is time for a word with you."

"I have nothing to say to you," said Percy, sulkily.

"I dare say not; but I have to you. Look here, old fellow; you and I have been friends for a good long time, first and last altogether, in a good many places, about the world, and I tell you what it is, Percy, I am not going to stand this sort of thing any longer."

"What sort of thing?" said the other.

He paused, and they turned out together again, and began pacing slowly in the darkness the gravel road which ran round the lawn.

"Well, it is this sort of thing you have

been carrying on to-night. You have got hold of the wrong end of it, old boy; you need not look in this direction—it is no affair of mine, Percy; you need not be giving yourself the trouble of being jealous of me."

"I am not jealous!" said the young fellow, indignantly; "I am not such an ass."

"Well, you are thinking something about *her*, and about me as well, that is not true, and that is devilish hard on me, at all events, since you vent your views on the subject upon my innocent head occasionally, and make it deuced unpleasant, I tell you, all round. Give it up, Percy. It is all nonsense; there is not a bit of truth in the notion you have got into your head."

"She doesn't care a brass farthing for

me, I know," said Percy, gloomily; "and I should like to know whose fault that is if it is not yours?"

"Not mine! old fellow; not mine! Look another way, I tell you; open your sleepy eyes and see. *I* have nothing to do with it."

"Then who the deuce has, I should like to know?" exclaimed the other, emphatically, turning now upon Everett in the path, and looking with newly-awakened wonder, and with eyes wide-open in the dusky light upon his face. He never doubted his friend's statement, and looked upon him instantly with restored sentiments of confidence and regard. "Who the deuce can it be?"

"Use your eyes, I tell you! I cannot announce, even to you, Percy, that kind of thing. But wait a bit; not now, but before

the twentieth. You just look around and make a few observations, and you will see fast enough with half an eye. You have not much cause, I assure you, to be jealous of me."

"The twentieth! Who is coming before then? Why, we are all here now, surely? No! Let me think! By God! What an ass I have been! what a blind, thick-headed fool, Everett! You do not mean it?—you cannot mean it? You are *surely* not thinking of Verner Carr?"

"Do not ask me any questions, I tell you; only be more civil to me in future, my good fellow, and open up your sleepy optics for yourself."

"Good Lord!" murmured Percy, *sotto voce*, as they turned into the house. "Carr! I never thought of him for a moment! I never dreamt of her liking Verner Carr!"

CHAPTER XI.

TWO PLUNGES.

IT was a fortnight later, and it was a cloudy afternoon. On just such a day the trout will rise, quick and eager, round the dancing line; and on such a day it is heavy work walking upon the moor, through the tufted heather, for the grouse do not rise freely, and the dogs are sluggish, and the scent is poor.

So they had struck work that morning at the Glen house, and the laird had proposed an idle day, and Clare had the benefit of her friends' society all the long summer after-

noon. Before luncheon there was much letter-writing in the laird's workshop and in the barracks' smoking-room, and Everett, at universal suggestion, had stayed at home also from his work on the hill.

There was much smoking, and much enjoyment of repose before the lunch hour all over the house.

Immediately that meal was despatched, however, Captain Keith went off on some private shooting expedition of his own. He could not "keep his gun quiet," as the old laird said, not even for one entire August day, so they had recommended the rabbits to his notice, and he started to the wide fields that formed a crowded warren between the house and the hills. Sir Edward gave himself up to Miss Erskine's society, to a drive with her in her little phaeton, and the enjoyment of complete rest.

The two brothers went off together, round the gardens and the home farms, and the inseparable and devoted trio, Percy, Everett, and Clare, disappeared at an early hour of the grey afternoon towards the river.

And, there, the falling of the twilight found them still, Everett sitting among the long grass and ferns by the water-side, with the music of the rushing stream in his ears, with the drooping branches of the hanging trees almost hiding him, with his brush and sketch-book in hand, an open box full of bright-tinted colours by his side, and a roughly outlined picture growing vividly beneath his rapid touch.

There was the bend of the river, a soft grey blue in the winding distance, a dark coffee brown in the deep parts round the jagged rocks. It made a piece of fine colouring as the groundwork of his picture,

rich and various;—flecked and lit up here and there with bits of sunny foam, where the stream eddied and gurgled round some great boulder-stone, rising midway in its eager course. He had caught a group of Highland cattle, little sturdy red-coated beasts, as they drank in a bay by a bit of grassy bank, on the opposite side, a little down the river; and he had thrown in a graceful cluster of beautiful birch, that, silver-stemmed and feathery-leaved, swept down almost to the water's brink.

Amidst long sedge grass and the tangled flowers that grew along the bank, there came into the sketch, in the foreground, the recumbent figure of Percy, his long, grey-clad limbs stretched with easy indolence and careless grace, his yellow head resting upon his hand, the fishing-basket and landing-nets beside him, and his own fishing-rod

also, lying idle and disregarded, a little distance away.

He was watching Clare—and she was fishing. She seemed the only one who had sufficient energy, on this sultry evening, for the sport for which they had all avowedly come.

There, standing on a grey rock near the centre of the stream, she, too, came into the view for Everett. Her trim figure, in Norfolk jacket and short-cut skirt, steadily poised upon the jagged stone, her golden brown hair glinting softly in the summer light, and the bright tints of the fly-hooks twisted round her hat, formed a glowing piece of vivid colour.

She threw her line deftly from time to time, and cast her hook to drop far over the stream, with the lightness of a feather's touch, upon the water. She had been fishing

with true sportsmanlike earnestness, and in perfect silence, for a long time, and trout after trout had risen to her tempting fly, been played dexterously, and landed safely by her in Percy's basket.

He lay ready, as she called to him, to spring up and land each captive of her rod, exertion which seemed sufficient for his energies that afternoon.

"We must be going home, I fancy," shouted Everett, at length, from his corner, where he sat buried in sedge grass under the drooping trees. "Do you not want some tea, Éclair?"

The girl turned as he called to her, and paused a moment before she answered, poising her fishing-rod against her side with one firm, steady, hand, and glancing over towards her casting-line, as it floated lightly upon the glistening bosom of the stream.

"No," she replied, "I do not want any tea; I am much too absorbed, and it is far too fine an evening for the trout, Everett, to think of going home yet; but, what o'clock is it?" she continued, and she reddened slightly, as she turned away from the bank, and cast her line again.

"Oh," said Everett, "it is about half-past six; you need not go in with respect to dinner for quite an hour to come, if you do not really want any tea."

"No," she repeated, hesitatingly, "but I think I will go up in a little while though, now."

"Why?" said Percy, sententiously, as if he thought she would tell him, and as if he did not already know!

"Oh, because it will be late enough, and cousin Marion will have come in; but I will have one more trout, Percy, whatever happens, before I go."

"Then I hope he will be a long time in biting," said Percy, in a melancholy undertone.

His present amusement seemed to suit him, lying idly on the long grass, waiting to land Clare's trout for her, and gazing at her trim and agile figure, as she threw her line high above her head, and cast it again and again. It seemed to suit him perfectly. All at once she called to him—

"Oh, Percy, come!"

He sprang up, seized the landing-net, and paused a moment, as she held her rod firm and still.

"Have you got him?" he shouted.

"Yes; he is such a huge fellow. Oh, I cannot hold the rod!"

"By Jove, he must be a grilse!" Percy exclaimed again. "Hold on to him, and I'll be there."

He jumped on to the rock nearest the brink, as he said this, and proceeded to spring, from one to another towards her, over the stepping-stones. But before he reached the middle of the stream, the big fish had leaped very high into the air above the water, and, with a violent struggle, as he fell again, nearly twitched the bending rod out of Clare's small, clinging hands.

"Come, Percy, quick, come!" she called to him; and he was there, just behind her, seeking a footing upon the jagged rock, so as to stand close by her side. But he had not quite reached her, when the fish struggled again, plunged and leapt once more in the troubled water, and then ran out suddenly, carrying line and hooks along with him, away down the current of the rushing stream.

Clare clung valiantly to her rod; she bent

with it, and loosed the running line. Then she stood up again, swerved, lost her balance, and, just before Percy reached her, she stepped forward, lost her footing, and nearly fell into the stream. She struggled, still keeping tight hold of the bending rod, and for a moment she swayed to and fro; another second, and a cold bath, up almost to her waist in the rushing water, would have been her certain fate; but Percy was just in time, and suddenly and without an instant's hesitation, he plunged into the stream by her side. It was the one thing he could do to save her; the rock was too small and slippery to support them both steadily upon it, and he could not arrest her downward plunge in any other way, for she had quite lost her balance. But there he was, and before she had plunged also, and before, indeed, she was clearly conscious of what

was going to occur, his arms were round her—she was lifted fairly off the rock, and, clinging bravely to her precious rod, he carried her safely to the shore. Alas! the line was broken, and the big fish had escaped.

But where was Everett? He had disappeared, slipped quietly home by himself, with his book in his pocket, and his sketch quite finished, just after that suggestion about the tea. Probably it had struck him as a pleasant suggestion, and he had gone up to purvey for some in the drawing-room, or under the big tree. At all events, he had left them; and there were Percy and Clare, he wet as a spaniel, holding her tightly in his arms, and standing close by the grassy edges of the stream.

"Percy, put me down, please, directly," said Clare, for he held her very fast, now he had got her, and she was no more for him

to carry thus than a child of a couple of years; and he held her close and firm, although very gently and with very respectful care; and Clare felt ridiculously helpless, quite unable to free herself, or in any sort of way to escape. He had rescued her from a cold plunge, at all events, and he had got her fast. "Put me down!" she repeated as he did not at once obey. "Percy!"—and her tone was angry and indignant, the gratitude of her first impulse, as he carried her ashore, disappearing fast before the sense of her position—"put me down directly, or I will never, never speak to you again!"

So he obeyed her at length, and deposited her upon her feet, and then he stood still before her, dripping like a great spaniel, from every possible point, upon the long grass, and looking down upon her with a

flush upon his cheek, and an eager light in his blue eyes, that made her turn hers away instantly from him, as she looked up and met his glance.

"Oh, Percy, how wet you are!"

"I do not care," he said; "I would like to do it again."

"Oh, please do not be silly!" she said, quickly, in a pleading but almost impatient tone. "Don't, Percy, don't! I am so much obliged to you. But come, for we must go home, and get dried immediately. Oh, dear, why did Everett go away?"

"I do not know, and I do not care a farthing," he said; and as he stood there, and let the water drip into the sedge grass, his voice sounded altered, different from usual; it was determined, and full of strong emotion, that was with difficulty subdued.

"Oh, come," she said, a little wearily

again; "look, my rod is so very bent, and my line is broken; there is no use fishing any more to-night."

"It is not that," he answered. "But look here, Clare; I am going to speak *now*, this very moment. I am not going to be put off again."

"Do *not* then, Percy," she said, pleadingly again. "Please do not!"

"I will, I *must* say it. I do not care, as, indeed, I seem to know well enough what answer I shall receive; but I must speak, I must say it now."

"It is no good," she then said to him, in a kindly, almost compassionate tone.

"I know it is not; but listen to me, for just this once; hear me. Can you have *any* conception what I feel for you, Clare?"

"I know," she answered. "You are very good, and I do not deserve it; but—

oh, Percy, dear Percy, will you not let me go?"

"I love you, Clare," he went on, "to that degree of idiotcy, that I have not got anything left in me but my love for you. I have loved you so long and so silently, that it has grown down and down, I think, somewhere into the very heart-springs of my life. If you will not love me, Clare, not one little bit, and if you drive me from you, I really do not know what I shall do."

"Oh, please, Percy, do not go on like that—do not be so dreadfully serious and miserable. Of course I like you very, very, very much; I have always liked you; but, Percy, I cannot, you know. I cannot, I mean, that other kind of thing."

"But you can for other people!" he growled, in suddenly roused anger again.

"Hush!" she exclaimed in answer, with a vivid flush instantly crimsoning her cheek. "Hush! that is not fair of you, Percy. I do not know anything about that at all."

"But *I* know," he continued, angrily. "And you know he is coming to-night, that horrid fellow——" But he could get no further.

"Percy!"

Could it be Clare's voice? Instantly it seemed to arrest him; it was so cold, so dignified, and so intensely offended in its tone. She was looking quietly at him, standing close before him with hands folded, and with eyes raised indignantly to his face.

"Well, I don't want to make you angry," he began again. "But he is the very last fellow——"

"Percy! what do you mean?" she exclaimed. "Who are you talking about? What right have I ever given you to speak of any one in this sort of way?"

"Oh, hang it!" he said. "No; what a thundering fool I always am! Of course, you did not; I beg your pardon, Clare. Never mind him, he may be an Apollo and a great hero of romance, or anything else you please, for all I care. Only, Clare, don't *you* think about him, and give *me* a little bit of hope. Tell me you will begin some day to care just a very, very little for me."

"I care very much for you now, Percy," she answered. "Only do not go on in this foolish and excited way. Let me alone, or I am afraid we shall begin to quarrel and—above all, remember—never talk to me about anybody else again."

"You have as good as refused me," he said, doggedly, as they turned to walk up the pathway together side by side.

"Oh, Percy, do not say such dreadful things; do not be so fearfully serious, please, please, I do beg of you! We were so very happy in the old time, before you began to go on like this."

"It is all very well for you, Clare," he answered. "You will not take it seriously, and as for what I feel for you, I cannot even get you to take it in. But, look here, Clare, perhaps you will one of these days. You know you have not had much room yet for anything very serious in your life; but—if it comes, then recollect—that is all I want to say now—just recollect the words I have said to you to-day. You may come to understand them, as you are quite resolved you won't do so now. Look here,

Clare, we may not be going about so much together after this as we have always done, for I do not much think I will stop here, nor will I go this winter cruising on the yacht; I do not feel quite like it. So, I think, this is somehow a sort of good-bye, to the old days, I mean. I have told you I love you, you know—and I cannot go back again after that to be quite the same; so remember it, Clare, will you? all your life, whatever changes come. I love you with all my might. I will go on loving you, too, I am quite sure of that; so—you have *got* it, you know. You may always feel sure of it, Clare, whatever goes or comes."

She did not stop him now as he walked beside her and poured out his eager appeal. She was quite grave and quiet, and she tried no longer to laugh away his words.

"Percy, you have always been so kind to me," she said.

"It was kind to myself I was," he answered. "Clare, when you came first, a little bit of a girl among us raffish fellows, do you remember? I have loved you every hour since then."

"You are too good to me," she repeated. "Percy, I am sure I wish it were not so; I wish you would love any one else as well."

"I cannot," he said, "and I never will, so there it is, and you, Clare?—you cannot give me one spark of hope?"

"Oh, Percy, do not," again she pleaded. "No, no; I cannot feel in that way, my dear old friend."

"Very well," he answered; "that is enough for the present, Clare."

And then they came suddenly just in sight of the house.

It was late, as it always was, on these August evenings when they came driving or walking home.

It was near the dressing hour; and the gloaming had begun—the lights were soft over the house and garden, and the smoke from the tall grey chimneys curled heavily in the air. A group stood round the house door, as Percy, sorrowful and still dripping wet, and Clare, with bending head and downcast glance, came together across the lawn—a group, and a big dog-cart.

Her uncle, Sir Edward, Charlie Keith with his gun still resting upon his shoulder, and a tall figure, a new comer, clad in ulster from head to heel.

Percy turned off by the house corner, and disappeared suddenly without a word.

The old laird called to greet Clare, and the stranger turned round and advanced.

In the soft light of the gloaming her deep flush and the quick pallor that followed it were both alike unseen; only the sweet, fervent light in her hazel eyes glowed through the dusk as they were raised in welcome, and met the keen, speaking glance bent eagerly upon her from the dark, handsome eyes of—Verner Carr!

"Here you are," she said, softly, and she let her hand rest a moment in the lingering, soft clasp of his.

"Here I am," he answered in reply; "having found my way at last, following an unerring compass, to your beautiful Highland home."

His eyes rested on her face in the gloaming, as he answered her, and he retained her hand, as if unconsciously, until she spoke again.

"You are welcome," she said, and there

was a strange, tender dignity in the utterance; the shyness of awakening passion struggling with the instinctive hospitality of her race. Her heart might beat as she thus greeted him, and her glance fall, but none the less must he, with every other stranger, receive a welcome to her glen.

"I thank you," he murmured softly, and then he released her hand and dropped it gently, and withdrew his searching eyes from her face. They both turned to the porch door as her uncle called.

The greeting had only occupied a brief moment of time, not enough to attract attention from anybody, as the party stood loitering at the door.

And the laird had still more welcomes to give, and more hopes to express, that if Major Carr cared for the grouse moor,

or the long morning stalk in the rocky forest, he might be able to show him "a little tolerable sport."

Then they went in to dinner, for it was eight o'clock.

CHAPTER XII.

VERNER CARR.

"MY darling, he is very handsome," said Marion, as, later on in the evening, she sat with Clare in the drawing-room and snatched a few minutes for confidence while they were alone.

"Do you think so, cousin Marion? Do you like his dark, deep eyes?"

"*Like* is another question. But that he is good-looking, no one can dispute. Are you going to be caught just with that kind of thing, my Clare?"

"I am sure I do not know," answered the girl. "I often wonder why I told you anything about it; or why I think anything about him at all. I do not know that he wants to catch *me*, cousin Marion; he has never said so, at all events. But you can judge for yourself of him now."

"Yes, I can, my Clare, and I fear I do judge."

"Do not tell me, then," said Clare, with a fervent, impatient gesture, and a curious, weary tone. "I do not want to hear any more ill of him, and if you have, all of you, nothing nice of him to say to me, please, cousin Marion, I would rather you said nothing at all. And you know there is no need, or at all events, not at present, that anything, good or bad, should be said."

"And while there is no need I will say

nothing, my darling; and, it is true, one dinner's acquaintance and the flash of an eye and the curl of a lip is too little, perhaps, from which to judge a man."

"Please do not judge at all," said Clare. "I had rather, after all, cousin Marion, you did not notice him in any way."

And so she felt as the door opened suddenly, and Verner entered the room. The others followed him, but he came in with an easy, indifferent lounge, a little in advance of the rest. And with the same cool air of *insouciance*, he made his way just to the point for which he had come, to the empty place on the small sofa by Clare's side.

"May I sit down?" he said, looking softly at her from under his dark lashes, and smoothing his long, drooping moustache.

"You may," and she moved quietly and made room for him, and Miss Erskine rose

to walk to the tea-table, which stood ready on one side.

Amid the cover of the loud, cheery voices of Old George and his brother, as they came laughing together into the room, Verner bent towards Clare, and smiled softly into her face, and murmured some eager, half-audible words. They were tender words, evidently, and seemed to break from him as if unawares, and incontrollably, but they were scarcely audible, and he arrested them half spoken, and seemed with difficulty to return to silence again. And they left her without power of answer, for nothing distinctly reached her to which she could exactly reply, only she found herself giving back in silence the expression—surely quite sufficiently eloquent and unmistakable—of his gaze, as it still rested, full of love, tender and intensely wistful, upon her face.

How could he put so much unuttered tenderness into the safe, silent language of the eyes?

He talked rapidly of his journey after that, withdrawing his eyes, when they had won their answer, with a soft smile of triumph from her face.

And as he spoke, and she answered, quietly wondering why her own voice should sound so differently when it was pitched for him, he let his quick, furtive gaze roam across the room from side to side, from one to the other of the assembled party, from Miss Erskine to Everett, but oftenest from the old laird to George.

These two figures, as they stood side by side on the hearth-rug, had, apparently, a most particular interest for him. No wonder, perhaps; they were such a curious contrast, and as brothers, and twin-brothers,

such an altogether peculiar pair. The laird, simple in attire, dignified in person, nodding his head with gentle emphasis, as he conversed with his brother, his only gesture an occasional emphatic rap on the lid of his "snuff-mull;" and George, resplendent in attire, from his spacious shirt-frill to his diamond studs and sleeve-links; well curled and perfumed, and fearfully tight-laced; with figure youthful and severely military; with dainty feet and snowy hands—on which the rings glittered brilliantly as he raised them in incessant and dramatic gesticulations, when he talked.

Charlie Keith and Everett Hardy stood by Miss Erskine, at the tea-table.

Percy ensconced himself in a deep arm-chair at the furthermost end of the room. He went to sleep, it was generally supposed among them, and no one disturbed

his repose. But, poor Percy! if they had examined closely enough, it would have been soon discovered that he was not asleep. His heavy eyelids hung low, indeed, but from beneath them his blue, clear eyes looked out, down the length of the room, to where sat Clare and Verner, and in the eyes, and on the whole countenance, was a look of deep, sullen despair, that was painful, indeed, and very saddening to see upon such a young, fair, *insouciant* face.

It was a very bad business with him, poor fellow! He was hit very hard indeed. The ache in his true, simple heart was a sore and a weary one. It would last him long, and would rob the sunshine from many a summer's day.

And Verner Carr, who would seem to have won the prize thus easily, at which so

many gazed from a far distance wistfully and in vain; who had seemed to have got her almost unasked, and would have all her great inheritance, if she came to it, when he got herself—What manner of man was he? Now, as the night came and he was alone, and his glance chilled to its natural cold light, as the smile fled from his dark lip, and his eyes lost the eager, ever-wooing expression that sought her face, with the subtle, caressing sweetness she had learnt unwittingly to love—What manner of man was he?

A handsome man, with a figure, as Hardy often said, that might have stood for Spanish Philip, as a matador or a muleteer, with a long, drooping moustache and dark hair and colouring, with a pale, olive-tinted cheek, with a quick, restless smile, and with these deep, dark eyes that spoke so sweetly

for him, that he had scarcely need to take sufficient trouble to express his love in words. Their language had done the work already, and it was the silent and subtle language that suited him best just then.

It had been a great enjoyment to Verner Carr, through the past season, to teach these little love lessons, in that speech of silence, to the free-hearted and unthinking Clare. But even if it had not amused him, he would have done it, and just in that way, all the same. For Verner was almost penniless and without any prospects to speak of, and Clare Erskine was the rumoured heiress of the Glen. So he meant to woo her and to win her also, if it all proved sound and true. But he was a wary wooer, very wary for his years, indeed, and he had only gathered rumour, and knew

nothing yet for certain with regard to that heritage of hers; nothing as to its certainty, nothing as regards its real richness or extent. And as this valuable self of Major Verner Carr, with all his charms and personal beauty and air of distinction and grace, could only be disposed of to one happy heiress, it behoved him to be very certain that it was really the right one on whom this precious favour was bestowed.

About Clare he was very dubious when he had left London, and it was still quite a question in his mind if she was the one heiress for him. This Highland property might be a heritage of barren moorland and peaty bogs; the Highland castle might be a tottering, owl-haunted tower, and of the revenue he knew nothing at all.

The exquisite beauties of the old glen, with the grey house and the glistening loch,

and the towering hills, and the murmurs of the waterfall and rushing river, had amazed him as he had driven along; and when the ancient personage who had acted as his coachman, a superannuated retainer of the laird's, who had been promoted from the coach-box to the care of the dog-cart which the laird himself always drove,—when this old worthy, in broad accent and very mystical dialect, had endeavoured, in answer to the inquiries he persistently put, to explain to him where the glen began and where it ended, and where the laird "mairched," as he called it, with the Earl of Rae, Verner Carr had been amazed again, but he did not believe it all, and decided in his own mind that the ancient coachman was a bragging, stupid-headed old fool. "Probably knows nothing about it," he added in mental ejaculation to himself.

Still Clare was evidently worth a great many tender glances, at all events, and if one tenth or fifteenth part of all this should one day belong to her, she was an heiress worth capturing indeed.

But that one day, when might it dawn upon them, and how far was her inheritance secure against George Erskine's debts?

"Confound it all!" he muttered to himself, as he wound his watch, and contemplated his comely face and shoulders in his dressing-glass. "Confound it all! You are a doosed good-looking fellow, my dear Verner, but how uncommon difficult it is to get to the bottom of things!"

And this was the man she loved, while she "never thought of Percy," and was even quite unconscious of the depth of that chivalrous devotion of Everett Hardy to her.

This was he, and these were his chief attractions: a wooing gaze, a handsome face, a slight, graceful figure, a musical voice, either to murmur uncertain, uncatchable words, or to sing soft, loving things that seemed unutterable save in sweet, foreign tongues. Just "a way with him," that is all he had. But certainly a taking "way," and it had taken Clare quite completely, for the time being; taken her fancy, at any rate, if it had not reached even deeper still, into her sweet, earnest heart.

We will hope not that, however, for he certainly was not worthy of her in any way.

CHAPTER XIII.

SIGNALS.

NEXT day they had a picnic—such a picnic as one must travel up to that land of lochs and rushing burns, and heather hills, to enjoy in all its characteristics and peculiarities, for I have never come across one exactly like it in any corner of the world elsewhere.

It was a fresh morning, with a light wind, softly rippling the loch and driving the summer clouds across the sunshine, as they chased one another in a blue-grey, dappled sky. The shadows and lights shifted and

quivered over the hill-sides, and on the silvery leaves and stems of the weeping birch trees. The sun's heat was tempered, and the wild, sweet-scented breeze was pleasant and soft and cool.

It played across the loch and the river, it swept over the golden waves of the harvest fields, and whispered its restless music among the woods.

As the laird stepped on to his favourite esplanade, outside the dining-room, waiting, before he began his breakfast, for some of his guests to appear, he exclaimed suddenly, called into the room to Marion, who was bending over the tea-urn, and then continued to look across the loch, shading his keen, hazel eyes with his hand—

"Hah!" he said pleasantly, "her ladyship has a message to-day."

Marion in one moment was beside him, and they looked out together.

There was evidently, to their minds, some particular meaning in what they saw. About a mile distant across the glistening loch, against the soft background of the sloping brae, rose a slowly curling pillar of smoke. It rose straight into the air, from a sheltered point between the sides of a ravine, which a sparkling waterfall made just there upon the hill. It rose slowly, white and soft and feathery, curling steadily into the summer's air, and together they watched it for a moment.

"What can they want to-day at Knockionan?" at length Miss Erskine said. "Perhaps Lady Arnleigh is coming over; or is it only a signal for the ferry-boat?"

"We shall see," replied the old laird. "Wait a moment,—the fire has only just been lighted. I will fetch a glass directly, and look if they have run up a flag.—Good

morning, Sir Edward, will you step out here, and see our Highland signals across the loch?"

"Good morning, my dear sir. Miss Erskine, your humble servant. What a heavenly day! Signals? Oh dear, yes—I well remember. I was about to ask you if your delightful neighbours, *en vis à vis*, have arrived?"

"Come only a couple of days ago, and we have not been across to see them yet. We hope that that smoky column may mean that they are perhaps coming over to visit us to-day."

"Ah! well, now, that is very interesting!" replied Sir Edward, with enthusiasm, as he stood by the stone balustrade with Miss Erskine, and gazed across the stretch of water, while the laird went off to fetch his glass.

The pillar of snowy smoke still rose steadily against the brae.

"Have Lord and Lady Arnleigh a large party with them this season, do you suppose, Miss Erskine?"

"I really do not know, for I have not heard from them just lately; but I have no doubt they have a few friends—they cannot put up many at one time, as you know, in the old Knockionan Lodge."

"No, so I recollect; but what a lovely spot it is, to be sure; and how faithful Lord and Lady Arnleigh have been to this part of the world!"

"They have, indeed. I can hardly imagine an autumn at Knockionan without them."

"Charming people!" answered Sir Edward. "Dear! I must say you have all the cream of our southern society, Miss

Erskine, in the autumn-time up here in the North."

"Scotland has become much the fashion, no doubt," said Miss Erskine, quietly; "and in many instances, Sir Edward, we have good reason to be grateful for that fashion, which brings us so often our dearest and most charming friends."

"Ah!" replied Sir Edward, with a suave bow and smile, for he had taken the remark, spoken rather absently by Miss Erskine, as she looked up at the rising smoke, as meant entirely for himself, and he was much pleased and flattered. "Ah!" he said, "you may trust a charming woman to turn each swift-passing remark to something graceful, never to be forgotten, and most delightful to hear."

"Especially if we take it all to ourselves," laughed Charlie Keith, in an aside

to Everett, for they had come through the dining-room together, and out on the stone roof, while Miss Erskine and Sir Edward were speaking.

She turned to greet them, and laughed lightly as she caught Charlie's whispered words, and realized Sir Edward's sense of flattered satisfaction.

"Do you know what the plans for the day are, Captain Keith?" she said, pleasantly.

"No, I do not," he replied. "Only the laird said last night, that as we had shot the moors pretty heavily for the last fourteen days, he fancied we might have to pull up a bit—perhaps give a rest. He was to see Donald this morning, Miss Erskine, and to let me know the plans by ten o'clock. At all events, we were not to make an early start, as you see."

"I am very glad of that," Miss Erskine answered, "for there is the more likelihood of our being able to fall in with whatever may be Lady Arnleigh's plans. Ah! father, here you are with your glass at last! The smoke is still rising. Will you look if they have run up any signal on the flag-staff?"

"I have been looking from the porch door," the laird answered, with a pleased and a cheery smile, "and the signal is there, and says distinctly, 'Will you all come over to-day?'"

"That is charming!" exclaimed Miss Erskine. "And such a lovely crossing, too, as we shall have over the loch! No wind to signify, and the sun so shaded and cool! What time, father? What do the signals say?"

"'Come over before luncheon,'" said the

laird, raising his telescope again. "Will you look, Sir Edward? It is very clear, is it not? The blue flag, with the striped red one, half-masted, below."

"Clear for those who understand it, my dear laird. Does that signal mean that Lady Arnleigh does us the honour to expect us at luncheon to-day?"

"Clearly, according to the language of our flags. So come in to breakfast, gentlemen, and we will discuss the plans. I have sent Donald down to the pier to signal acceptance, Marion, for I shall go over and pay my respects to Lady Arnleigh, at all events, and I will be truly glad to shake hands once more with my lord. I suppose I shall be safe, in any case, Marion, of your company and Clare's?"

When breakfast was over, and the day's prospects had been thoroughly canvassed,

the laird found his boating party for Knockionan augmented far beyond what he had been inclined to expect.

In fourteen days' hard shooting some of the steam of the ardent sportsmen had been worked off. Sir Edward was a little stiff, indeed, about the back and shoulders, and extremely glad of the opportunity to lay down his gun.

Old George felt, as his brother said, eager to take this earliest occasion of paying a visit across the loch. Clare was, of course, enchanted to go—entreated her uncle to have out the long boat, stipulating that Donald and Hugh Maciver should row them, and that she should steer.

"It is many a day since they have rowed to my steering, uncle Lairdie, is it not?" she said, laughing. "I shall be glad to see them sweeping their long oars through the water again."

Everett turned his thoughts agreeably to a new sketch-book, to be started upon the other side, and also to the pleasure of meeting their host and hostess of Knockionan again.

"I always say Lady Arnleigh is the most charming woman in London," he said; "and I think I'll let my big picture have a rest with the grouse to-day."

Verner Carr was as fond of hill shooting as of every other sport or enjoyment that came his way in life. But as Clare, fresh and bright in cool summer dress, took her seat beside him at the breakfast-table, he said to himself that on the present occasion there was other game to follow, more worth his while, and so he, too, said—"By all means—delighted," when Miss Erskine asked him if he would join their expedition to the other side.

Percy only was sulky, and muttered, when invited graciously, "Thanks, much obliged to you, but no—picnics are not in my line."

And Charlie Keith exclaimed that of course he "was ready for what they wished, but, well, if Bligh was going to shoot anything the laird might suggest for him, it was a pity for him to let his gun grow rusty either."

But Percy said he did not want to shoot.

"What then?" asked Charlie, bewildered, not seeing any other earthly occupation that, on a day in August, with his distinguished and versatile talents, Percy could possibly do.

"Do not know, and do not care," the other answered him, and then every one knew that Percy Bligh was in the sulks.

"Oh, if that is the kind of thing," said Keith, "just please yourself; but I will have

little Duncan and a long rifle, if I may, laird, and I will be bound he will show me something in a day's walk over the Cluanach Braes."

"I do not doubt he will," replied the old laird. "And he is at your service, Captain Keith. You are indefatigable, and I dare say you will bring home a roe and a good mixed bag between you, at all events."

"And have a capital day, laird, I have no doubt. Many thanks to you."

CHAPTER XIV.

"POOR OLD PERCY."

PERCY had his own little ways of life at all times among them, and it was a liberty-hall community with Old George's set, where they lived pleasantly together, and invariably "let live" as well.

So no one asked Percy another question, and he went his way, trudging up through the red-stemmed pines on to a bit of rocky hill that they made their Sunday walk; and he trudged along, scarcely

caring even to smoke, until he reached a sharp point from where the loch view was seen magnificently, and where a curious stone seat was placed, upon which he had sat just the previous Sunday, and watched the sunset reflections over the water with Clare.

And from there, as he sat now alone, he could see the boat start; watch it shoot out from the shore near the river's mouth, and turn across the shining surface, swift and straight as an arrow, guided by Clare's unerring helm. He could see the flash of the long oars as they struck the blue, limpid water, and the graceful boat's point as it cut the sunny waves; could see it as it went further and further across the waters away from him, and as the figures of Hugh and Donald (the laird's two special oarsmen, bending their stalwart shoulders to

and fro), and the figures of all the group of passengers they carried on board became vague and dim. He watched till the boat disappeared, passing into the soft shadows beneath the woody bank, and till nothing remained for him to gaze at, save the quivering tract of light, that lay far behind it, and marked its swift and certain course.

So, *she* had gone from him, with that gay boat-load! Parted from him with smiles and laughter, scarcely conscious of his utter misery, amid the joys and sweetness that thrilled her own awakening heart. And there she had left him, to sit and suffer and gaze out over the sea of light, across which she had disappeared from him, and out also over the stretch of his young, shadowed life, upon which he could see at present no tracts of light at all.

He had not been "much of a fellow" (as people had been apt to say), this big silent Percy — indolent, *insouciant*, *débonnaire*, with few conscious feelings and no conscious thoughts.

"Life had been well enough," he would have said, if any one had questioned him as to its enjoyment, and he had gone on quiescent, until lately, just fairly satisfied with the run of things as they were.

But what had reached him now? What power had entered with electric and vitalizing energy into his heart, and soul, and brain? What kind of life was all this that he had been living through these glancing and gliding years? Up came the question, surging in his heavy heart to-day,—What had he cared for in it all? Nothing whatever, or so at least it seemed now to him.

What kind of aim or object had he found in it? No aim, no purpose, and surely no satisfaction at all. "Surely he had been a duffer," he said to himself, and in this was the vague expression of a dim consciousness concerning the dull indifference that had characterized his way of regarding life.

"Surely I have made 'ducks and drakes' of it," he continued, and by this he meant that, perhaps, there may have been something better he might possibly have done with his strength and time. "After all, it was not a wonder she would not look at me;" and this was the somewhat mournful conclusion to which he came.

But now, good Heavens! could he do without her? What a dreary, miserable outlook it was! He could not cease to love her; that was impossible, for it

would be quite foreign to his nature so to do.

He was like a great, faithful St. Bernard dog, in that strong, deep heart of his, and so, now that he had got hold of some one (however buried, as far as he was concerned, in the snow), he would keep hold of her, and stick to her through everything, whatever happened, until the very end.

So, he knew his fate, and sat and faced it; but no light came over it for him from any source at all.

"What should he do?" he growled roughly to himself; for he must get away.

When a girl said "No" to a man, decidedly, then, as he went on to express it, "the fellow did not keep hanging about."

But where was he to go?

There were the Rocky Mountains! Lots of men, when they came a smash of this

kind, as he remembered, went straight off there.

But the Rocky Mountains—what was the good of them? He did not want to see the Rocky Mountains—he only wanted Clare. But he could not get her. So he must go somewhere, and he thought and thought again.

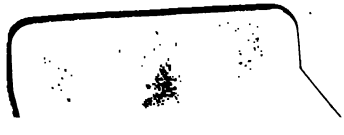
There was Wynton, his brother's place; they would have a lot of men down there in a week or two, for his brother did not care much for shooting, and would be watching his St. Leger horse, and coaching little Bill Bradley upon him during the early September days.

And he liked Wynton; but no, they would chaff him there about the Highland heiress, and bully him to "try his chance."

His chance, indeed; as if he had got any

"No matter; cheer up!" he exclaimed, at last, as he roused himself sufficiently to light a big, fragrant cigar.

"Do not say 'die,' old fellow; let's start off at least and go somewhere, and to the devil, if he comes first to hand! Cheer up, at all events! Don't make an ass of yourself, and if you can't be jolly—well, be as jolly as you can."

END OF VOL. I.

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